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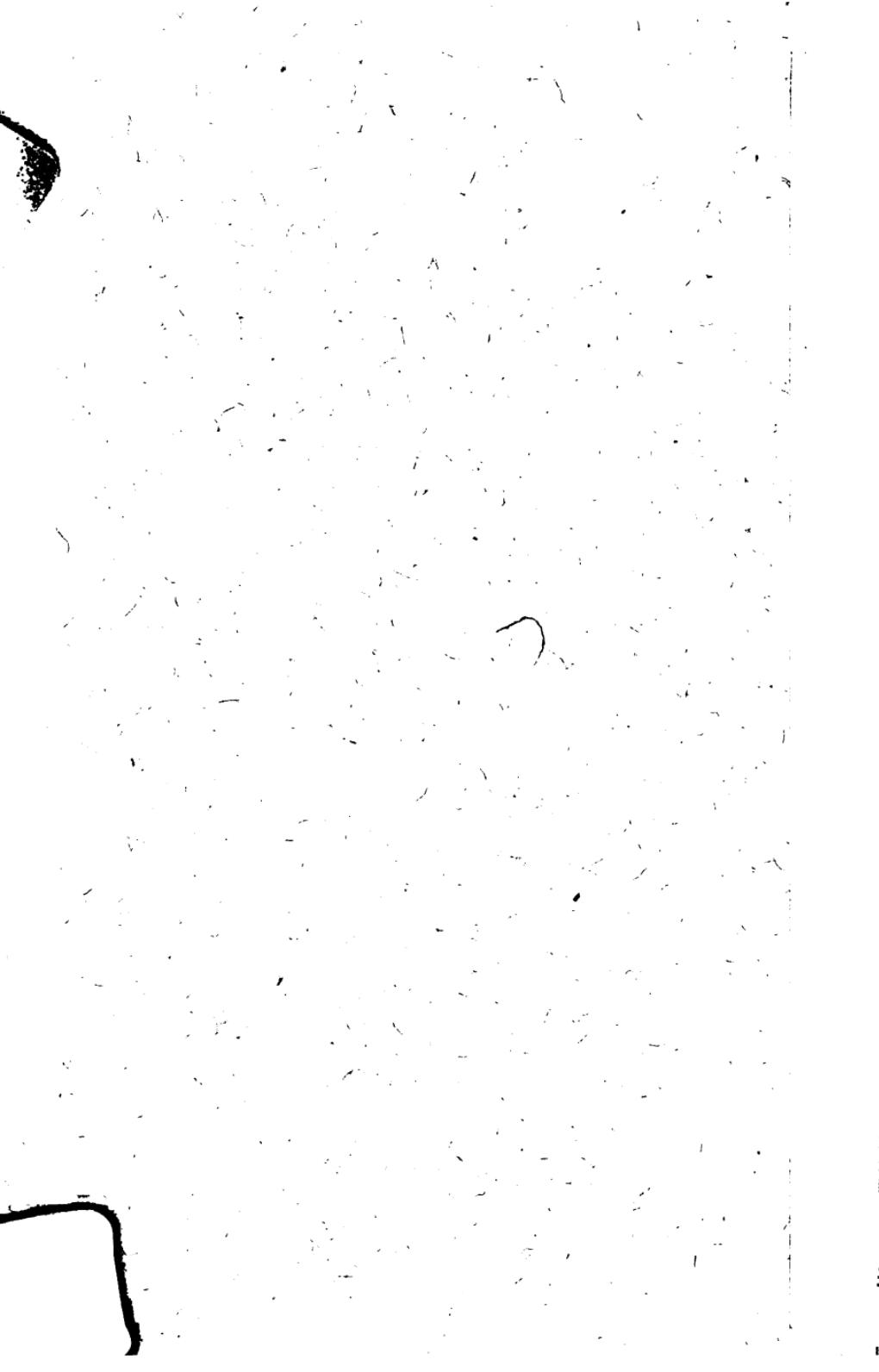
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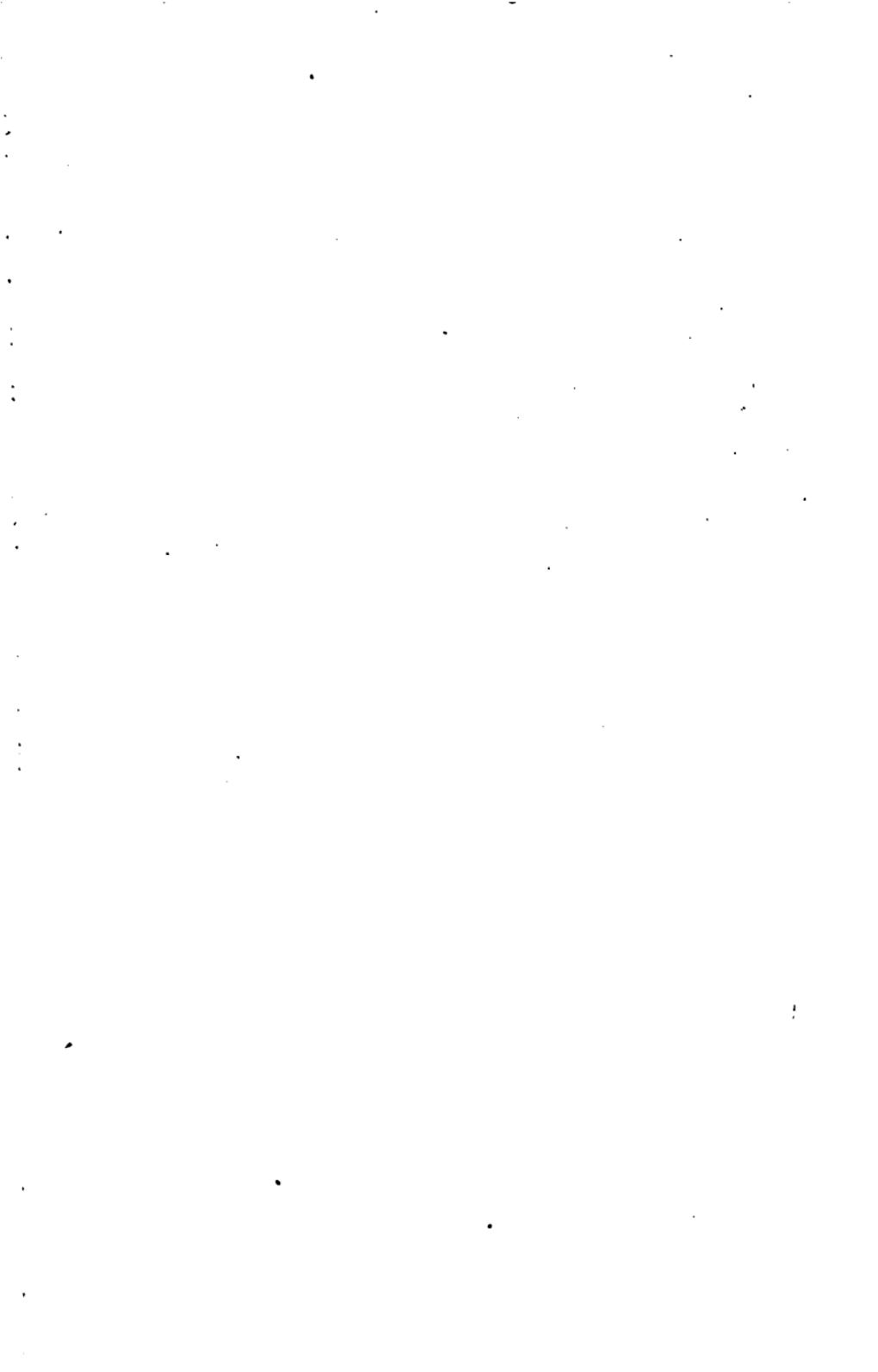


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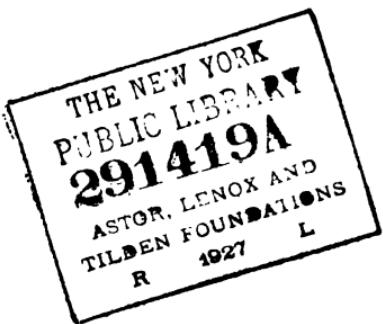
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THE SEVEN CARDINAL SINS

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PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD COMMANDER.

Elle avait un vice, l'orgueil, qui lui tenait lieu de toutes les qualités.¹

COMMANDER BERNARD, a resident of Paris, after having served under the Empire in the Marine Corps, and under the Restoration as a lieutenant in the navy, was retired about the year 1830, with the brevet rank of captain.

Honourably mentioned again and again for his daring exploits in the maritime engagements of the East Indian war, and subsequently recognised as one of the bravest soldiers in the Russian campaign, M. Bernard, the most unassuming and upright of men, with the kindest heart in the world, lived quietly and frugally upon his modest pension, in a little apartment on one of the least frequented streets of the Batignolles.

An elderly woman, named Madame Barbançon, had kept house for him ten years or more, and, though really very fond of him, led him a rather hard life at times,

¹She had one fault, pride, which, in her, answered in place of all the virtues.

for the worthy female, who had an extremely high temper and a very despotic disposition, was very fond of reminding her employer that she had sacrificed an enviable social position to serve him.

The real truth was, Madame Barbançon had long acted as assistant in the establishment of a well-known midwife,—an experience which furnished her with material for an inexhaustible stock of marvellous stories, her great favourite being her adventure with a masked lady who, with her assistance, had brought a lovely girl baby into the world, a child Madame Barbançon had taken care of for two years, but which had been claimed by a stranger at the expiration of that time.

Four or five years after this memorable event, Madame Barbançon decided to resign her practice and assume the twofold functions of nurse and housekeeper.

About this time Commander Bernard, who was suffering greatly from the reopening of several old wounds, needed a nurse, and was so well pleased with Madame Barbançon's skill that he asked her to enter his service.

"You will have a pretty easy time of it, Mother Barbançon," the veteran said to her. "I am not hard to live with, and we shall get along comfortably together."

Madame Barbançon promptly accepted the offer, elevated herself forthwith to the position of Commander Bernard's *dame de confiance*, and slowly but surely became a veritable servant-mistress. Indeed, seeing the angelic patience with which the commander endured this domestic tyranny, one would have taken the old naval officer for some meek-spirited *rentier*, instead of one of the bravest soldiers of the Empire.

Commander Bernard was passionately fond of gardening, and lavished any amount of care and attention upon a little arbour, constructed by his own hands and covered with clematis, hop-vines, and honeysuckle, where

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he loved to sit after his frugal dinner and smoke his pipe and think of his campaigns and his former companions in arms. This arbour marked the limits of the commander's landed possessions, for though very small, the garden was divided into two parts. The portion claimed by Madame Barbançon aspired only to be useful ; the other, of which the veteran took entire charge, was intended to please the eye only.

The precise boundaries of these two plats of ground had been, and were still, the cause of a quiet but determined struggle between the commander and his house-keeper.

Never did two nations, anxious to extend their frontiers, each at the expense of the other, resort to more trickery or display greater cleverness and perseverance in concealing and maintaining their mutual attempts at invasion.

We must do the commander the justice to say that he fought only for his rights, having no desire to extend, but merely to preserve his territory intact,—territory upon which the bold and insatiable housekeeper was ever trying to encroach by establishing her thyme, savory, parsley, and camomile beds among her employer's roses, tulips, and peonies.

Another cause of heated controversy between the commander and Madame Barbançon was the implacable hatred the latter felt for Napoleon, whom she had never forgiven for the death of a young soldier,—the only lover she had ever been able to boast of, probably. She carried this rancour so far, in fact, as to style the Emperor that "Corsican ogre," and even to deny him the possession of any military genius, an asseveration that amused the veteran immensely.

Nevertheless, in spite of these diverse political sentiments, and the ever recurring and annoying question of the boundaries of the two gardens, Madame Barbançon was, at heart, sincerely devoted to her employer,

and attended assiduously to his every want, while the veteran, for his part, would have sorely missed his irascible housekeeper's care and attentions.

The spring of 1844 was fast drawing to a close. The May verdure was shining in all its freshness; three o'clock in the afternoon had just sounded; and though the day was warm, and the sun's rays ardent, the pleasant scent of freshly watered earth, combined with the fragrant odour of several small clumps of lilacs and syringas, testified to the faithful care the commander bestowed upon his garden, for from a frequently and laboriously filled wash-tub sunk in the earth, and dignified with the name of reservoir, the veteran had just treated his little domain to a refreshing shower; nor had he, in his generous impartiality, excluded his housekeeper's vegetable beds and kitchen herbs from the benefits of his ministrations.

The veteran, in his gardening costume of gray linen jacket and big straw hat, was now resting from his labours in the arbour, already nearly covered with a vigorous growth of clematis and honeysuckle. His sunburned features were characterised by an expression of unusual frankness and kindness, though a heavy moustache, as white as his bristling white hair, imparted a decidedly martial air to his physiognomy.

After wiping the sweat from his forehead with a blue checked handkerchief and returning it to his pocket, the veteran picked up his pipe from a table in the arbour, filled and lighted it, then, establishing himself in an old cane-bottomed armchair, began to smoke and enjoy the beauty of the day, the stillness of which was broken only by the occasional twitter of a few birds and the humming of Madame Barbançon, who was engaged in gathering some lettuce and parsley for the supper salad. If the veteran had not been blessed with nerves of steel, his *dolce far niente* would have been sadly disturbed by the monotonous refrain of the old-fashioned

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love song entitled “Poor Jacques,” which the worthy woman was murdering in the most atrocious manner.

“Mais à présent que je suis loin de toi,
Je mange de tout sur la terre,”¹

she sang in a voice as false as it was nasal, and the lugubrious, heart-broken expression she gave to the words, shaking her head sadly the while, made the whole thing extremely ludicrous.

For ten years Commander Bernard had endured this travesty without a murmur, and without taking the slightest notice of the ridiculous meaning Madame Barbançon gave to the last line of the chorus.

It is quite possible that to-day the meaning of the words struck him more forcibly, and that a desire to devour everything upon the surface of the earth did not seem to him to be the natural consequence of separation from one’s beloved, for, after having lent an impartial and attentive ear a second time to his housekeeper’s doleful ditty, he exclaimed, laying his pipe on the table:

“What the devil is that nonsense you are singing, Madame Barbançon?”

“It is a very pretty love song called ‘Poor Jacques,’ ” snapped Madame Barbançon, straightening herself up. “Every one to his taste, you know, monsieur, and you have a perfect right to make fun of it, if you choose, of course. This isn’t the first time you have heard me sing it, though.”

“No, no, you’re quite right about that!” responded the commander, satirically.

“I learned the song,” resumed the housekeeper, sighing heavily, “in days — in days — but enough!” she exclaimed, burying her regrets in her capacious bosom. “I sang it, I remember, to that masked lady who came — ”

“I’d rather hear the song,” hastily exclaimed the

¹ Instead of “Je manque de tout sur la terre.”

veteran, seeing himself threatened with the same tiresome story. "Yes, I much prefer the song to the story. It isn't so long, but the deuce take me if I understand you when you say :

"*Mais à présent que je suis loin de toi,
Je mange de tout sur la terre.*"

"What, monsieur, you don't understand?"

"No, I don't."

"It is very plain it seems to me, but soldiers are so unfeeling."

"But think a moment, Mother Barbançon; here is a girl who, in her despair at poor Jacques's absence, sets about eating everything on the face of the earth."

"Of course, monsieur, any child could understand that."

"But I do not, I must confess."

"What! you can't understand that this unfortunate young girl is so heart-broken, after her lover's departure, that she is ready to eat anything and everything—even poison, poor thing! Her life is of so little value to her,—she is so wretched that she doesn't even know what she is doing, and so eats everything that happens to be within reach—and yet, her misery doesn't move you in the least."

The veteran listened attentively to this explanation, which did not seem to him so entirely devoid of reason, now, after all.

"Yes, yes, I understand," he responded, nodding his head; "but it is like all love songs—extremely far-fetched."

"Poor Jacques' far-fetched? The idea!" cried Madame Barbançon, indignantly.

"Every one to his taste,' as you remarked a moment ago," answered the veteran. "I like our old sea songs very much better. A man knows what he is singing about when he sings them."

THE OLD COMMANDER.

And in a voice as powerful as it was discordant, the old captain began to sing :

“ Pour aller à Lorient pêcher des sardines,
Pour aller à Lorient pêcher des harengs — ”

“ Monsieur ! ” exclaimed Madame Barbançon, interrupting her employer, with a highly incensed and prudish air, for she knew the end of the ditty, “ you forget there are ladies present ”

“ Is that so ? ” demanded the veteran, straining his neck to see outside of the arbour.

“ There is no need to make such an effort as that, it seems to me,” remarked the housekeeper, with great dignity. “ You can see me easy enough, I should think.”

“ That is true, Mother Barbançon. I always forget that you belong to the other sex, but for all that I like my song much better than I do yours. It was a great favourite on the *Armide*, the frigate on which I shipped when I was only fourteen, and afterwards we sang it many a time on dry land when I was in the Marine Corps. Oh, those were happy days ! I was young then.”

“ Yes, and then Bû-û-onaparte ” — it is absolutely necessary to spell and accent the word in this way, to give the reader any idea of the disdainful and sneering manner in which Mother Barbançon uttered the name of the great man who had been the cause of her brave soldier boy’s death — “ Bû-û-onaparte was your leader.”

“ Yes, the Emperor, that ‘ Corsican ogre,’ the Emperor you revile so, wasn’t far off, I admit.”

“ Yes, monsieur, your Emperor was an ogre, and worse than an ogre.”

“ What ! worse than an ogre ? ”

“ Yes, yes, laugh as much as you like, but he was. Do you know, monsieur, that when that Corsican ogre had the Pope in his power at Fontainebleau, do you know how grossly he insulted our Holy Father, your beast of a Bû-û-onaparte ? ”

"No, Mother Barbançon, I never heard of it, upon my word of honour."

"It is of no use for you to deny it; I heard it from a young man in the guards—"

"Who must be a pretty old customer by this time, but let us hear the story."

"Ah, well, monsieur, your Bû-û-onaparte was mean enough, in his longing to humiliate the Pope, to harness him to the little King of Rome's carriage, then get into it and make the poor Holy Father drag him across the park at Fontainebleau, in order that he might go in this fashion to announce his divorce to the Empress Josephine—that poor, dear, good woman!"

"What, Mother Barbançon," exclaimed the old sailor, almost choking with laughter, "that scoundrel of an Emperor made the Pope drag him across the park in the King of Rome's carriage to tell the Empress Josephine of his divorce?"

"Yes, monsieur, in order to torment her on account of her religion, just as he forced her to eat a big ham every Good Friday in the presence of Roustan, that dreadful mameluke of his, who used to boast of being a Mussulman and talk about his harem before the priests, just to insult the clergy, until they blushed with shame. There is nothing to laugh at in all this, monsieur. At one time, everybody knew and talked about it, even—"

But, unfortunately, the housekeeper was unable to continue her tirade. Her recriminations were just then interrupted by a vigorous peal of the bell, and she hurried off to open the door.

A few words of explanation are necessary before the introduction of a new character, Olivier Raymond, Commander Bernard's nephew.

The veteran's sister had married a copyist in the Interior Department, and after several years of wedded life the clerk died, leaving a widow and one son, then

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about eight years of age ; after which several friends of the deceased interested themselves in the fatherless boy's behalf, and secured him a scholarship in a fairly good school.

The widow, left entirely without means, and having no right to a pension, endeavoured to support herself by her needle, but after a few years of pinched and laborious existence she left her son an orphan. His uncle Bernard, his sole relative, was then a lieutenant in command of a schooner attached to one of our naval stations in the Southern Pacific. Upon his return to France, the captain found that his nephew's last year in college was nearing an end. Olivier, though his college course had been marked by no particularly brilliant triumphs, had at least thoroughly profited by his gratuitous education, but unfortunately, this education being, as is often the case, far from practical, his future on leaving college was by no means assured.

After having reflected long and seriously upon his nephew's precarious position, and being unable to give him any pecuniary assistance by reason of the smallness of his own pay, Commander Bernard said to Olivier :

" My poor boy, there is but one thing for you to do. You are strong, brave, and intelligent. You have received an education which renders you superior to most of the poor young men who enlist in the army. The conscription is almost sure to catch you next year. Get ahead of it. Enlist. In that case, you will at least be able to select the branch of the service you will enter. There is fighting in Africa, and in five or six years you are likely to be made an officer. This will give you some chance of a career. Still, if the idea of a military life is distasteful to you, my dear boy, we will try to think of something else. We can get along on my pay, as a retired officer, until something else offers. Now think the matter over."

Olivier was not long in making up his mind. Three

months afterward he enlisted, on condition that he should be assigned to the African Chasseurs. A year later he was a quartermaster's sergeant; one year afterward a quartermaster. Attacked with one of those stubborn fevers, which a return to a European climate alone can cure, Olivier, unfortunately, was obliged to leave Africa just as he had every reason to expect an officer's epaulettes. After his recovery he was assigned to a regiment of hussars, and, after eighteen months' service in that, he had recently come to spend a six months' furlough in Paris, with his uncle.

The old sailor's flat consisted of a tiny kitchen, into which Madame Barbançon's room opened, of a sort of hall-way, which served as a dining-room, and another considerably larger room, in which the commander and his nephew slept. Olivier, knowing how little his uncle had to live on, would not consent to remain idle. He wrote a remarkably good hand, and this, together with the knowledge of accounts acquired while acting as quartermaster, enabled him to secure several sets of books to keep among the petty merchants in the neighbourhood; so, instead of being a burden upon the veteran, the young officer, with Madame Barbançon's connivance, secretly added his mite to the forty-eight francs' pay the commander received each month, besides treating his uncle now and then to agreeable surprises, which both delighted and annoyed the worthy man, knowing, as he did, the assiduous labour Olivier imposed upon himself to earn this money.

Accustomed from childhood to privations of every kind, first by his experience as a charity pupil, and subsequently by the vicissitudes of army life in Africa, kind-hearted, genial, enthusiastic, and brave, Olivier had but one fault, that is, if an excessive delicacy in all money matters, great and small, can be called a fault. As a common soldier, he even carried his scruples so far that he would refuse the slightest invitation from

THE OLD COMMANDER.

his comrades, if he was not allowed to pay his own score. This extreme sensitiveness having been at first ridiculed and considered mere affectation, two duels, in which Olivier quite covered himself with glory, caused this peculiarity in the character of the young soldier to be both accepted and respected.

Olivier, cheerful, obliging, quick-witted, and delighted with everything, enlivened his uncle's modest home immensely by his gay spirits. In his rare moments of leisure the young man cultivated his taste by reading the great poets, or else he spaded and watered and gardened with his uncle, after which they smoked their pipes, and talked of foreign lands and of war. At other times, calling into play the culinary knowledge acquired in African camps, Olivier initiated Madame Barbançon into the mysteries of *brochettes de mouton* and other viands, the cooking lessons being enlivened with jokes and all sorts of teasing remarks about Bû-û-o-naparte, though the housekeeper scolded and snubbed Olivier none the less because she loved him with her whole heart. In short, the young man's presence had cheered the monotonous existence of the veteran and his housekeeper so much that their hearts quite failed them when they recollect that two months of Olivier's leave had already expired.

CHAPTER II.

THE BRAVE DUKE.

OLIVIER RAYMOND was not more than twenty-four years of age, and possessed a singularly expressive and attractive face. His short, white hussar jacket, trimmed with red and decorated with yellow frogs, his well-cut, light blue trousers, that fitted his well-formed supple limbs perfectly, and his blue kepi, perched upon one side of a head covered with hair of the same bright chestnut hue as his moustache, imparted an extremely dashing and martial air to his appearance, only, instead of a sabre, Olivier carried that day under his left arm a big roll of papers, and in his right hand a formidable bundle of pens.

As the young man deposited these eminently peaceful implements upon a table, he turned, and exclaimed gaily, "How are you, Mamma Barbançon?"

In fact, he even had the audacity to put his long arms about the housekeeper's bony waist, and give her a slight squeeze as he spoke.

"Will you never have done with your nonsense, you rascal?" snapped the delighted housekeeper.

"Oh, this is only the beginning. I've got to make a complete conquest of you, Mamma Barbançon."

"Of me?"

"Unquestionably. It is absolutely necessary. I'm compelled to do it."

"And why?"

"In order to induce you to grant me a favour."

"We'll see about that. What is it?"

THE BRAVE DUKE.

“ Tell me first where my uncle is.”

“ Smoking his pipe out under the arbour.”

“ All right! Wait for me here, Mamma Barbançon, and prepare your mind for something startling.”

“ Something startling, M. Olivier ?”

“ Yes, something monstrous — unheard-of — impossible !”

“ Monstrous — unheard-of — ” repeated Madame Barbançon, wonderingly, as she watched the young soldier dash off in pursuit of his uncle.

“ How are you, my lad? I didn’t expect you so early,” said the old captain, holding out his hand to his nephew in pleased surprise. “ Home so soon! But so much the better !”

“ So much the better !” retorted Olivier, gaily. “ On the contrary, you little know what is in store for you. Courage, uncle, courage !”

“ Stop your nonsense, you young scoundrel !”

“ Close your eyes, and now, ‘ forward march !’ ”

“ Forward march ? Against whom ?”

“ Against Mother Barbançon, my brave uncle.”

“ But why ?”

“ To break the news that — that — that I have invited — some one to dinner.”

“ The devil !” exclaimed the veteran, recoiling a step or two in evident dismay.

“ To dinner — to-day,” continued the young lieutenant.

“ The devil !” reiterated the veteran, recoiling three steps this time.

“ Moreover, my guest — is a duke,” continued Olivier.

“ A duke ! We are lost !” faltered the veteran.

And this time he entirely vanished from sight in his verdant refuge, where he seemed as resolved to maintain his stand as if in some impregnable fortress. “ May the devil and all his imps seize me if I undertake to announce any such fact as this to Mother Barbançon !”

“ What, uncle, — an officer of marines — afraid ?”

"But you've no idea what a scrape you've got yourself into, young man! It's a desperate case, I tell you. You don't know Madame Barbançon. But, good heavens, here she comes now!"

"Our retreat is cut off, uncle," laughed the young man, as Madame Barbançon, whose curiosity had been excited to such a degree that she could wait no longer, appeared in the entrance to the arbour. "My guest will be here in an hour at the very latest, and we needs must conquer or perish of hunger,—you and I and my guest, whose name, I ought to tell you, is the Duc de Senneterre."

"It's no affair of mine, unhappy boy," responded the commander. "Tell her yourself; here she is."

But Olivier only laughed, and, turning to the dreaded housekeeper, exclaimed:

"My uncle has something to tell you, Madame Barbançon."

"There's not a word of truth in what he says," protested the veteran, wiping the sweat from his brow with his checked handkerchief. "It is Olivier who has something to tell you."

"Come, come, uncle, Mother Barbançon is not as dangerous as she looks. Make a clean breast of it."

"It is your affair, my boy. Get out of the scrape as best you can."

The housekeeper, after having glanced first at the uncle and then at the nephew with mingled curiosity and anxiety, at last asked, turning to her employer:

"What is it, monsieur?"

"Ask Olivier, my dear woman. As for me, I've nothing whatever to do with it; I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"Ah, well, Mamma Barbançon," said the young soldier, bravely, "you are to lay three covers instead of two at dinner, that is all."

"Three covers, M. Olivier, and why?"

THE BRAVE DUKE.

"Because I have invited a former comrade to dine with us."

"*Bon Dieu!*" exclaimed the housekeeper, evidently more terrified than angry, "a guest, and this is not even *pot au feu* day. We have only an onion soup, a vinaigrette made out of yesterday's beef, and a salad."

"And what more could you possibly want, Mamma Barbançon?" cried Olivier, joyously, for he had not expected to find the larder nearly so well supplied. "An onion soup concocted by you, a vinaigrette and a salad seasoned by you, make a banquet for the gods, and my comrade, Gerald, will dine like a king. Take notice that I do not say like an emperor, Mamma Barbançon."

But this delicate allusion to madame's anti-Bonapartist opinions passed unnoticed. For the moment the worshipper of the departed guardsman was lost in the anxious housewife.

"To think that you couldn't have selected a *pot au feu* day when it would have been such an easy matter, M. Olivier," she exclaimed, reproachfully.

"It was not I but my comrade who chose the day, Mamma Barbançon."

"But in polite society, M. Olivier, it is a very common thing to say plainly: 'Don't come to-day; come tomorrow. We shall have the *pot au feu* then.' But, after all, I don't suppose we've got dukes and peers to deal with."

Olivier was strongly tempted to excite the worthy housewife's perturbation to the highest pitch by telling her that it was indeed a duke that was coming to eat her vinaigrette, but scarcely daring to subject Madame Barbançon's culinary self-love to this severe test, he contented himself with saying:

"The mischief is done, Mamma Barbançon, so all I ask is that you will not put me to shame in the presence of an old African comrade."

"Great heavens! is it possible you fear that, M. Olivier? Put you to shame—I? Quite the contrary, for I would like—"

"It is getting late," said Olivier, "and my friend will soon be here, as hungry as a wolf, so, Mamma Barbançon, take pity on us!"

"True, I haven't a minute to lose."

And the worthy woman bustled away, repeating dolefully, "To think he couldn't have chosen *pot au feu* day!"

"Well, she took it much better than I expected," remarked the veteran. "It is evident that she is very fond of you. But now, between ourselves, my dear nephew, you ought to have warned me of your intentions, so your friend might have found, at least, a passable dinner, but you just ask him to come and take pot-luck; and he is a duke into the bargain. But, tell me, how the deuce did you happen to have a duke for a comrade in the African Chasseurs?"

"I'll explain, my dear uncle, for I'm sure you'll take a great fancy to my friend Gerald. There are not many of his stamp to be found nowadays, I assure you. We were classmates at the college of Louis le Grand. I left for Africa. Six months afterward my friend Gerald was in the ranks beside me."

"A private?"

"Yes."

"But why didn't he enter the army by way of St. Cyr? It was merely a whim or caprice on his part, I suppose, this enlisting?"

"No, uncle; on the contrary, Gerald's conduct in the matter has been the result of profound reflection. He is a grand seigneur by birth, being, as I told you just now, the Duc de Senneterre."

"That is a name that has figured prominently in the history of France," remarked the old sailor.

"Yes, the house of Senneterre is as ancient as it is

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illustrious, uncle, but Gerald's family has lost the greater part of the immense fortune it once possessed. There remains now, I think, an income of barely forty thousand francs a year. That is a good deal of money for the generality of people, but not for persons of noble birth; besides, Gerald has two sisters who must be provided with dowries."

"But tell me how and why your young duke happened to join the army as a private?"

"In the first place, my friend Gerald is very original in his ideas, and has all kinds of odd notions about life. When he found himself within the conscription age, on leaving college, his father—he had a father then—remarked one day, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that arrangements must be made to secure a substitute if any such contingency should arise, and do you know what this peculiar friend of mine replied?"

"Tell me."

"'Father,' said Gerald, 'this is a duty that every right-minded man owes to his country. It is an obligation of race, particularly when a war is actually going on, and I consider it an ignoble act to endeavour to escape the dangers of war by hiring some poor devil to leave his farm or work-bench and go and run the risk of being killed in your stead. To do this is to confess oneself a coward, and, as I am not desirous of such a reputation, I shall serve, if my name is drawn.'"

"Zounds! I'm in love with your young duke, already!" exclaimed the veteran.

"He stated the case pretty correctly, didn't he?" replied Olivier, with friendly complacency. "Though this resolution seemed very strange to his father, that gentleman had too keen a sense of honour to oppose it. Gerald's name was drawn, and that is the way he happened to be a private in the African Chasseurs, currying his horse, doing his share of the stable and kitchen work like the rest of us, and even going to the guard-house without a

word of complaint if he absented himself without permission. In short, there wasn't a better soldier in the regiment."

"Nor a braver, too, I'll be bound," said the veteran, more and more interested.

"Brave as a lion, and so gay and enthusiastic when he charged upon the enemy that he would have fired the hearts of a whole battalion!"

"But with his name and connections, I should think he would soon have been made an officer."

"And so he would, doubtless, though he cared nothing about it, for when his term of service expired, and he had paid his debt to his country, as he expressed it, he said he wanted to return and again enjoy the pleasures of Paris life of which he was passionately fond. After three years of service Gerald had become a quartermaster like myself. About this time he was severely wounded in the shoulder during a bold charge upon quite a large body of Arabs. Fortunately, I was able to extricate him and carry him off the field,—lifeless to all appearance,—on my horse. The result was he was furloughed, and on leaving the service he went back to Paris. We had become quite intimate, and after his return to France we kept up quite a brisk correspondence. I hoped to meet him again upon my arrival here, but I learned that he was travelling in England. This morning, as I was walking along the boulevard, I heard some one call me at the top of his voice, and, turning, I saw Gerald jump out of a handsome cabriolet, and a second later we were embracing each other as two friends embrace each other on the battlefield after a warm engagement."

"We must dine and spend the evening together,' he said. 'Where are you staying?'

"With my uncle,' I replied. 'I have told him about you a hundred times, and he loves you almost as much as I do.'

"Very well, then I will come and take dinner with

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you,' said Gerald. 'I want to see your uncle. I have a thousand things to say to him.'

"And knowing what a kind-hearted, unassuming fellow Gerald is, I assented to his proposal, warning him, however, that I should be obliged to leave him at seven o'clock, exactly as if I were clerk of the court, or was obliged to return to quarters," concluded Olivier, gaily.

"Good lad that you are!" said the commander, affectionately.

"It will give me great pleasure to introduce Gerald to you, uncle, for I know that you will feel at ease with him at once; besides," continued the young soldier, colouring a little, "Gerald is rich, I am poor. He knows my scruples, and as he is aware that I could not afford to pay my share of the bill at any fashionable restaurant, he preferred to invite himself here."

"I understand," said the veteran, "and your young duke shows both delicacy of feeling and kindness of heart in acting thus. Let us at least hope that Madame Barbançon's vinaigrette won't disagree with him," added the commander, laughing.

He had scarcely given utterance to this philanthropical wish when the door-bell gave another loud peal, and a moment afterwards the uncle and nephew saw the young Duc de Senneterre coming down the garden walk preceded by Madame Barbançon, who was in such a state of mental perturbation that she had entirely forgotten to remove her big kitchen apron.

CHAPTER III.

THE DINNER IN THE ARBOUR.

THE Duc de Senneterre, who was about Olivier Raymond's age, had a distinguished bearing, and an exceedingly handsome and attractive face, with black hair and moustache, and eyes of a deep rich blue. His attire was marked with an elegant simplicity.

"Uncle, this is Gerald, my best friend, of whom I have so often spoken," said Olivier.

"I am delighted to see you, monsieur," said the veteran, cordially offering his hand to his nephew's friend.

"And I, commander," rejoined Gerald, with that deference to age which is imbibed from prolonged military service, "am sincerely glad to have the honour of pressing your hand. I know all your goodness to Olivier, and as I regard him almost as a brother, you must understand how thoroughly I have always appreciated your devotion to him."

"Gentlemen, will you have your soup in the house or under the arbour, as you usually do when the weather is fine?" inquired Madame Barbançon.

"We will dine in the arbour—if the commander approves, my dear Madame Barbançon," responded Gerald; "it will be charming; the afternoon is perfect."

"Monsieur knows me?" exclaimed the housekeeper, looking first at Olivier, and then at the duke, in great astonishment.

"Know you, Madame Barbançon?" exclaimed Gerald, gaily. "Why, hasn't Olivier spoken of you a hundred

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times while we were in camp, and haven't we had more than one quarrel all on your account?"

"On my account?"

"Most assuredly. That rascal of an Olivier is a great Bonapartist, you know. He cannot forgive any one for detesting that odious tyrant, and I took your part, for I, too, abhor the tyrant — that vile Corsican ogre!"

"Corsican ogre! You are a man after my own heart, monsieur. Let us shake hands — we understand each other," cried the housekeeper, triumphantly.

And she extended her bony hand to Gerald, who shook it heartily, at the same time remarking to the commander:

"Upon my word, sir, you had better take care, and you, too, Olivier, will have to look out now. Madame Barbançon had no one to help her before, now she will have a sturdy auxiliary in me."

"Look here, Madame Barbançon," exclaimed Olivier, coming to the rescue of his friend whom the housekeeper seemed inclined to monopolise, "Gerald must be nearly famished, you forget that. Come, I'll help you bring the table out here."

"True, I had forgotten all about dinner," cried the housekeeper, hastening towards the house.

Seeing Olivier start after her, as if to aid her, Gerald said:

"Wait a moment, my dear fellow, do you suppose I'm going to leave all the work to you?"

Then turning to the commander:

"You don't object, I trust, commander. I am making very free, I know, but when we were in the army together Olivier and I set the mess-table more than once, so you will find that I'm not as awkward as you might suppose."

It was a pleasure to see how cleverly and adroitly and gaily Gerald assisted his former comrade in setting the table under the arbour. The task was accomplished

so quickly and neatly that one would have supposed that the young duke, like his friend, must have been used to poverty all his life.

To please his friend, Gerald, in half an hour, made a complete conquest of the veteran and his housekeeper, who was delighted beyond expression to see her anti-Bonapartist ally partake with great apparent enjoyment of her onion soup, salad, and vinaigrette, to which Gerald even asked to be helped twice.

It is needless to say that, during this cheerful repast, the veteran, delicately led on by Gerald, was induced to talk of his campaigns ; then, this tribute of respect paid to their companion's superior years, the two young men related all sorts of episodes of their college and army life.

The veteran had lighted his pipe, and Gerald and Olivier their cigars, when the latter happened to inquire of his friend :

“ By the way, what has become of that scoundrel, Macreuse, who used to play the spy on us at college ? You remember him ? — a big, light-haired fellow, who used to cuff us soundly as he passed, just because he dared to, being twice as big as we were.”

At the name of Macreuse, Gerald's face took on an expression of mingled contempt and aversion, and he replied :

“ You speak rather slightlying, — M. Célestin de Macreuse, it seems to me.”

“ *De Macreuse !* ” cried Olivier. “ He must have treated himself to the *de* since we knew him, then. In those days his origin was shrouded in mystery. Nobody knew anything about his parents. He was so poor that he once ate half a dozen wood-lice to earn a sou.”

“ And then he was so horribly cruel,” added Gerald ; “ do you remember his putting those little birds' eyes out with a pin to see if they would fly afterwards ? ”

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“The scoundrel!” exclaimed the indignant commander. “Such a man as that ought to be flayed alive.”

“It would rejoice my heart to see your prediction fulfilled, commander,” said Gerald, laughing. Then, turning to Olivier, he continued: “It will surprise you very much, I think, when I tell you what I know of M. Célestin de Macreuse. I have told you, I believe, how very exclusive the society is in which my mother has always moved, so you can judge of my astonishment when one evening, shortly after my return to Paris, I heard the name of M. de Macreuse announced in my mother’s drawing-room. It was the very man. I had retained such an unpleasant recollection of the fellow, that I went to my mother and said:

“‘Why do you receive that man who just spoke to you,—that big, light-haired, sallow man?’

“‘Why, that is M. de Macreuse,’ my mother replied, in tones indicative of the profoundest respect.

“‘And who is M. de Macreuse, my dear mother? I never saw him in your house before.’

“‘No, for he has just returned from his travels,’ she answered. ‘He is a very distinguished and highly exemplary young man,—the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission.’

“‘The deuce! And what is the St. Polycarpe Mission, my dear mother?’

“‘It is a society that strives to make the poor resigned to their misery by teaching them that the more they suffer here, the happier they will be hereafter.’

“‘*Se non è vero, è ben trovato,*’ I laughingly remarked. ‘But it seems to me that this fellow has a very plump face to be advocating the good effects of starvation.’

“‘My son, I meant every word that I just said to you,’ replied my mother, gravely. ‘Many highly esteemed persons have connected themselves with M. de Macreuse’s work,—a work to which he devotes himself

with truly evangelical zeal. But here he comes. I would like to introduce you to him.'

"Pray do nothing of the kind, mother," I retorted, quickly. "I am sure to be impolite; I do not like the gentleman's looks; besides, what I already know of him makes my antipathy to his acquaintance insurmountable. We were at college together, and—"

"But I was unable to say any more; Macreuse was now close to my mother, and I was standing beside her. 'My dear M. de Macreuse,' she said to her protégé, in the most amiable manner, after casting a withering look at me, 'I wish to introduce my son, one of your former classmates, who will be charmed to renew his acquaintance with you.'

Macreuse bowed profoundly, then said, in a rather condescending way, 'I have been absent from Paris some time, monsieur, and was consequently ignorant of your return to France, so I did not expect to have the honour of meeting you at your mother's house this evening. We were at college together, and—'

"That is true," I interrupted, "and I recollect perfectly well how you played the spy on us to ingratiate yourself with the teachers; how you would stoop to any dirty trick to make a penny; and how you put out the eyes of little birds with pins. Possibly this last was in the charitable hope that their sufferings here would profit them hereafter."

"A clever thrust that!" exclaimed the commander, with a hearty laugh.

"And what did Macreuse say?" asked Olivier.

The scoundrel's big moon face turned scarlet. He tried to smile and stammer out a few words, but suddenly my mother, looking at me with a reproachful air, rose, and to rescue our friend from his embarrassment, I suppose, said, 'M. de Macreuse, may I ask you to take me to get a cup of tea?'"

"But how did this man gain an entrance into such an

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exclusive circle as that of the Faubourg St. Germain?" inquired Olivier.

"Nobody knows exactly," replied Gerald. "This much is true, however. If one door in our circle opens, all the others soon do the same. But this first door is hard to open, and who opened it for Macreuse nobody knows, though some persons seem to think that it was Abbé Ledoux, a favourite spiritual director in our set. This seems quite probable, and I have taken almost as strong a dislike to the abbé as to Macreuse. If this dislike needed any justification, it would have it, so far as I am concerned, in the estimate of Macreuse's character formed by a singular man who is rarely deceived in his judgment of persons."

"And who is this infallible man, pray?" inquired Olivier, smiling.

"A hunchback no taller than that," replied Gerald, indicating with his hand a height of about four and a half feet.

"A hunchback?" repeated Olivier, greatly surprised.

"Yes, a hunchback, as quick-witted and determined as his satanic majesty himself,—stiff as an iron bar to those whom he dislikes and despises, but full of affection and devotion to those whom he honours—though such persons, I am forced to admit, are rare—and never making the slightest attempt to conceal from any individual the liking or aversion he or she inspires."

"It is fortunate for him that his infirmity gives him this privilege of plain speaking," remarked the commander. "But for that, your hunchback would be likely to have a hard time of it."

"His infirmity?" said Gerald, laughing. "Though a hunchback, the Marquis de Maillefort is, I assure you—"

"He is a marquis?" interrupted Olivier.

"Yes, a marquis, and an aristocrat of the old school. He is a scion of the ducal house of Hautmartel, the head of which has resided in Germany since 1830. But

though he is a hunchback, M. de Maillefort, as I was about to remark before, is as alert and vigorous as any young man, in spite of his forty-five years. And, by the way, you and I consider ourselves pretty good swordsmen, do we not?"

"Well, yes."

"Very well; the marquis could touch us eight times out of twelve. He rivals the incomparable Bertrand. His movements are as light as a bird's, and as swift as lightning itself."

"This brave little hunchback interests me very much," said the veteran. "If he has fought any duels his adversaries must have cut strange figures."

"The marquis has fought several duels, in all of which he evinced the greatest coolness and courage, at least so my father, who was a personal friend of the marquis, once told me."

"And he goes into society in spite of his infirmity?" inquired Olivier.

"Sometimes he frequents it assiduously; then absents himself for months at a time. His is a very peculiar nature. My father told me that for many years the marquis seemed to be in a state of profound melancholy, but I have never seen him other than gay and amusing."

"But with his courage, his skill in the use of weapons, and his quick wit, he is certainly a man to be feared."

"Yes, and you can easily imagine how greatly his presence disquiets certain persons whom society continues to receive on account of their birth, in spite of their notorious villainies. Macreuse, for instance, as soon as he sees the marquis enter by one door, makes his escape by another."

The conversation was here interrupted by an incident which would have been unworthy even of comment in some parts of the town, but rare enough in the Batignolles.

The arbour in which the little party had dined skirted

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the garden wall, and at the farther end of it was a latticed gate, which afforded the occupants a view of the street beyond. A handsome carriage, drawn by two superb horses stopped exactly in front of this gate.

This carriage was empty.

The footman on the box beside the driver, and, like him, dressed in rich livery, descended from his seat, and drawing from his pocket a letter that evidently bore an address, looked from side to side as if in search of a number, then disappeared, after motioning the coachman to follow him.

“This is the first vehicle of that kind I’ve seen in the Batignolles in ten years,” remarked the old sailor. “It is very flattering to the neighbourhood.”

“I never saw finer horses,” said Olivier, with the air of a connoisseur. “Do they belong to you, Gerald?”

“Do you take me for a millionaire?” responded the young duke, gaily. “I keep a saddle-horse, and I put one of my mother’s horses in my cabriolet, when she is not using them. That is my stable. This does not prevent me from loving horses, or from being something of a sporting man. But, speaking of horses, do you remember that dunce, Mornand, another of our college mates?”

“And still another of our mutual antipathies,—of course I do. What has become of him?”

“He is quite a distinguished personage now.”

“He! Nonsense!”

“But I tell you he is. He is a member of the Chamber of Peers. He discourses at length, there. People even listen to him. In short, he is a minister in embryo.”

“De Mornand?”

“Yes, my worthy friend. He is as dull as ever, and twice as arrogant and self-complacent. He doubts everything except his own merit. He possesses an insatiable ambition, and he belongs to a coterie of jealous and spiteful individuals,—spiteful because they are mediocre, or,

rather, mediocre because they are spiteful. Such men rise in the world with marvellous rapidity, though Mornand has a broad back and supple loins,—he will succeed, one aiding the other."

Just then the footman who had disappeared with the carriage returned, and, seeing through the latticed gate the little party in the arbour, approached, and, raising his hand to his hat, said :

"Gentlemen, will you be so kind as to tell me if this garden belongs to No. 7?"

"Yes," replied the commander.

"And to the apartment on the ground floor of that house?"

"Yes."

"I rang that bell three times, but no one answered it."

"I occupy that apartment," said the commander, greatly surprised. "What do you want?"

"Here is a very important letter for a Madame Barbançon, who, I am told, lives here."

"Yes, she does live here," replied the veteran, more and more surprised.

Then, seeing the housekeeper at the other end of the garden, he called out to her:

"Mother Barbançon, the door-bell has rung three times, unanswered, while you've been trespassing upon my preserves. Come quick! Here is a letter for you."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DUCHESS.

MADAME BARBANÇON promptly responded to this peremptory summons, and, after a hasty apology to her employer, said to the waiting servant :

“ You have a letter for me ? From whom ? ”

“ From the Comtesse de Beaumesnil, madame,” replied the man, handing Madame Barbançon the letter through the lattice.

“ Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil ? ” exclaimed the astonished housekeeper ; “ I do not know her. I not only don’t know her, but I haven’t the slightest idea who she is — not the slightest,” the worthy woman repeated, as she opened the letter.

“ The Comtesse de Beaumesnil ? ” inquired Gerald, evidently much interested.

“ Do you know her ? ” asked Olivier.

“ I met her two or three years ago,” replied Gerald. “ She was wonderfully beautiful, then, but the poor woman has not left her bed for a year. I understand that hers is a hopeless case. Worse still, M. de Beaumesnil, who had gone to Italy with their only child, a daughter, who was ordered south by the physicians, — M. de Beaumesnil died quite recently in Naples, in consequence of having been thrown from his horse, so if Madame de Beaumesnil dies, as they apprehend, her daughter will be left an orphan at the age of fifteen or sixteen years.”

“ Poor child ! This is really very sad,” said the commander, sympathisingly.

"Nevertheless, Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a brilliant future before her," continued Gerald, "for she will be the richest heiress in France. The Beaumesnil property yields an income of over three million francs!"

"Three million francs!" exclaimed Olivier, laughing. "Can it be that there are people who really have an income of three million francs? Do such people come and go, and move about and talk, just like other people? I should certainly like to be brought face to face with one of these wonderful creatures, Gerald."

"I'll do my best to gratify you, but I warn you that as a general thing they are not pleasant to contemplate. I am not referring to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, however; she may be as beautiful as her mother."

"I should like very much to know how one can spend such an income as that," said the commander, in all sincerity, emptying the ashes from his pipe.

"Great Heavens! is it possible?" exclaimed Madame Barbançon, who, in the meantime, had read the letter handed to her. "I am to go in a carriage—in a carriage like that?"

"What is the matter, Mother Barbançon?" inquired the veteran.

"I must ask you to let me go away for a little while."

"Certainly, but where are you going, may I ask?"

"To the house of Madame de Beaumesnil," replied the good woman, in a very important tone. "She desires some information which I alone can give, it seems. May I turn Bonapartist if I know what to make of all this!"

But the next instant the former midwife uttered an exclamation, as if a new and startling idea had just occurred to her, and, turning to her employer, she said:

"Monsieur, will you step out into the garden a moment with me? I want to say a word to you in private."

"Oh," replied the veteran, following the lady out of the arbour, "it is an important matter, it seems. Go on; I am listening, Madame Barbançon."

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The housekeeper, having led her employer a short distance from the arbour, turned to him and said, with a mysterious air :

“ Monsieur, do you know Madame Herbaut, who lives on the second floor and has two daughters ? The lady to whom I introduced M. Olivier about a fortnight ago, you recollect.”

“ I don’t know her, but you have often spoken to me about her. Well, what of it ?”

“ I recollect now that one of her particular friends, Madame Lafn  , is now in Italy, acting as governess to the daughter of a countess whose name sounds something like Beaumesnil. In fact, it may be this very same countess.”

“ It may be, I admit, Mother Barban  on. Well, go on.”

“ And she may have heard about me through Madame Lafn  , whom I have met at Madame Herbaut’s.”

“ That, too, is very possible, Madame Barban  on. You will soon know for a certainty, however, as you are going to Madame Beaumesnil’s.”

“ *Mon Dieu !* monsieur, another idea has just occurred to me.”

“ Let us hear it,” said the veteran, with infinite patience.

“ I have told you about that masked lady who — ”

“ You’re not going to tell that story again, surely !” cried the commander, with the evident intention of beating a retreat.

“ No, monsieur, but what if all this should have some connection with that young lady ?”

“ The quickest way to ascertain, Mother Barban  on, is to get off as soon as possible. We shall both be the gainers by it.”

“ You are right, monsieur. I will go at once.”

And following her employer, who had returned to his guests in the arbour, the housekeeper said to the footman, who was still standing a few feet from the gate :

"Young man, as soon as I can get my bonnet and shawl on I shall be at your service."

And a few minutes afterwards Madame Barbançon, triumphantly passing the gate in her carriage, felt that the deference due her employer made it incumbent upon her to rise to her feet in the vehicle, and bow low to the commander and his guests.

Just then the clock in a neighbouring church struck seven.

"Seven o'clock!" exclaimed Olivier, evidently much annoyed. "I am very sorry, my dear Gerald, but I shall have to leave you."

"Already! And why?"

"I promised a worthy mason in the neighbourhood that I would go over his accounts with him this evening, and you have no idea what a task it is to straighten out books like his!"

"True, you did warn me that you would only be at liberty until seven o'clock," replied Gerald. "I had forgotten the fact, I was enjoying my visit so much."

"Olivier," remarked the veteran, whose spirits seemed to have undergone a sudden decline since his nephew's allusion to the work to which he intended to devote his evening, "Olivier, as Madame Barbançon is absent, will you do me the favour to bring from the cellar the last bottle of that Cyprian wine I brought from the Levant? M. Gerald must take a glass of it with us before we separate. The mason's accounts won't suffer if they do have to wait half an hour."

"An excellent idea, uncle, for I do not have to be as punctual now as if it were the week before pay-day. I'll get the wine at once. Gerald shall taste your nectar, uncle."

And Olivier hastened away.

"M. Gerald," began the commander, with no little embarrassment, "it was not merely to give you a taste of my Cyprian wine that I sent Olivier away. It was in

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order that I might be able to speak to you, his best friend, very plainly in regard to him, and to tell you how kind and thoughtful and generous he is."

"I know all that, commander. I know it well, but I like to hear it from your lips,—the lips of one who knows and loves Olivier."

"No, M. Gerald, no, you do not know all. You have no idea of the arduous, distasteful labour the poor boy imposes upon himself, not only that he may be no expense to me during his furlough, but that he may be able to make me little presents now and then, which I dare not refuse for fear of paining him. This handsome pipe, it was he who gave it to me. I am very fond of roses. He has just presented me with two superb new varieties. I had long wanted a big easy chair, for when my wounds reopen, which happens only too often, I am sometimes obliged to sit up several nights in succession. But a large armchair cost too much. Still, about a week ago, what should I see some men bringing in but that much desired article of furniture! I might have known it, for Olivier had spent I don't know how many nights in copying documents. Excuse these confidential disclosures on the part of poor but honest people, M. Gerald," said the old sailor, in a voice that trembled with emotion, while a tear stole down his cheek, "but my heart is full. I must open it to some one, and it is a twofold pleasure to be able to tell all this to you."

Gerald seemed about to speak, but the commander interrupted him.

"Pardon me, M. Gerald, you will think me too garrulous, I fear, but Olivier will be here in a minute, and I have a favour to ask of you. By reason of your exalted position, you must have many grand acquaintances, M. Gerald. My poor Olivier has no influence, and yet his services, his education, and his conduct alike entitle him to promotion. But he has never been willing, or he has never dared to approach any of his

superiors on this subject. I can understand it, for if I had been a ‘hustler’—as you call it—I should hold a much higher rank to-day. It seems to be a family failing. Olivier is like me. We both do our best, but when it is a question of asking favours our tongues cleave to the roof of our mouths, and we’re ashamed to look anybody in the face. But take care! Here comes Olivier,” hastily exclaimed the old sailor, picking up his pipe and beginning to puff at it with all his might; “try to look unconcerned, M. Gerald, for heaven’s sake try to look unconcerned, or Olivier will suspect something.”

“Olivier must be a lieutenant before his leave expires, commander, and I believe he will be,” said Gerald, deeply touched by these revelations on the part of the veteran. “I have very little influence myself, but I will speak to the Marquis de Maillefort. His word carries great weight everywhere, and strongly urged by him, Olivier’s promotion—which is only just and right—is assured. I will attend to the matter. You need give yourself no further anxiety on the subject.”

“Ah, M. Gerald, I was not mistaken in you, I see,” said the commander, hurriedly. “You are kind as a brother to my poor boy—but here he is—don’t let him suspect anything.”

And the good man began to smoke his pipe with the most unconcerned air imaginable, though he was obliged furtively to dash a tear from out the corner of his eye, while Gerald to divert his former comrade’s suspicions still more effectually, cried:

“So you’ve got here at last, slow-coach! I’m strongly inclined to think you must have fallen in with some pretty barmaid like that handsome Jewess at Oran. Do you remember her, you gay Lothario?”

“She was a beauty, that’s a fact,” replied the young soldier, smiling at the recollection thus evoked, “but she couldn’t hold a candle to the young girl I just met in

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the courtyard," replied Olivier, setting the dusty bottle of Cyprian wine carefully on the table.

"Ah, your prolonged stay is easily explained now!" retorted Gerald.

"Just hear the coxcomb," chimed in the veteran. "And who is this beauty?"

"Yes, yes, do give us the particulars of your conquest."

"She would suit you wonderfully well, M. le duc," laughed Olivier, "wonderfully well, for she is a duchess."

"A duchess?" queried Gerald.

"A duchess here!" exclaimed the commander. "The locality is indeed honoured, to-day. This is something new."

"I was only trying to gratify your vanity a little,—the vanity of a Batignollais, you know. My conquest, as that harebrained Gerald is pleased to call it, is no conquest at all; besides, the lady in question is not really a duchess, though people call her so."

"And why, pray?" inquired Gerald.

"Because they say she is as proud and beautiful as any duchess."

"But who is she? In my character of duke, my curiosity on this point should be gratified," insisted Gerald.

"She is a music teacher," replied Olivier. "She is degrading herself terribly, you see."

"Say rather the piano is becoming ennobled by the touch of her taper fingers,—for she must have the hands of a duchess, of course. Come now, tell us all about it. If you're in love, whom should you take into your confidence if not your uncle and your former comrade?"

"I sincerely wish I had the right to take you into my confidence," said Olivier, laughing; "but to tell the truth, this is the first time I ever saw the young girl."

"But tell us all you know about her."

"There is a Madame Herbaut who has rooms on the second floor of the house," replied Olivier, "and every

Sunday this excellent woman invites a number of young girls, friends of her daughters, to spend the evening with her. Some are bookkeepers or shop girls, others are drawing teachers, or music teachers, like the duchess. There are several very charming girls among them, I assure you, though they work hard all day to earn an honest living. And how intensely they enjoy their Sunday with kind Madame Herbaut! They play games, and dance to the music of the piano. It is very amusing to watch them, and twice when Madame Barbançon took me up to Madame Herbaut's rooms — ”

“ I demand an introduction to Madame Herbaut,—an immediate introduction, do you hear ? ” cried the young duke.

“ You demand—you demand. So you think you have only to ask, I suppose,” retorted Olivier, gaily. “ Understand, once for all, that the Batignolles are quite as exclusive as the Faubourg St. Germain.”

“ Ah, you are jealous ! You make a great mistake, though, for real or supposed duchesses have very little charm for me. One doesn't come to the Batignolles to fall in love with a duchess, so you need have no fears on that score ; besides, if you refuse my request, I'm on the best possible terms with Mother Barbançon, and I'll ask her to introduce me to Madame Herbaut.”

“ Try it, and see if you succeed in securing admittance,” responded Olivier, with a laughable air of importance. “ But to return to the subject of the duchess,” he continued, “ Madame Herbaut, who is evidently devoted to her, remarked to me the other day, when I was going into ecstasies over this company of charming young girls: ‘ Ah, what would you say if you could see the duchess ? Unfortunately, she has failed us these last two Sundays, and we miss her terribly, for all the other girls simply worship her ; but some time ago she was summoned to the bedside of a very wealthy lady who is extremely ill, and whose sufferings are so intense, as

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well as so peculiar in character, that her physician, at his wit's end, conceived the idea that soft and gentle music might assuage her agony at least to some extent."

"How singular!" exclaimed Gerald. "This invalid, whose sufferings they are endeavouring to mitigate in every conceivable way, and to whom your duchess must have been summoned, is Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"The same lady who just sent for Madame Barbançon?" inquired the veteran.

"Yes, monsieur, for I had heard before of this musical remedy resorted to in the hope of assuaging that lady's terrible sufferings."

"A strange idea," said Olivier, "but one that has not proved entirely futile, I should judge, as the duchess, who is a fine musician, goes to the house of Madame de Beaumesnil every evening. That is the reason I did not see her at either of Madame Herbaut's soirées. She had just been calling on that lady, probably, when I met her just now. Struck by her regal bearing and her extraordinary beauty, I asked the porter if he knew who she was. 'It was the duchess I'm sure, M. Olivier,' he answered."

"This is all very interesting and charming, but it is rather too melancholy to suit my taste," said Gerald. "I prefer those pretty and lively girls who grace Madame Herbaut's entertainments. If you don't take me to one, you're an ingrate. Remember that pretty shop-girl in Algiers, who had an equally pretty sister!"

"What!" exclaimed the veteran, "I thought you were talking a moment ago of a pretty Jewess at Oran!"

"But, uncle, when one is at Oran one's sweetheart is at Oran. When one is at Algiers, one's sweetheart is there."

"So you're trying to outdo Don Juan, you naughty boy!" cried the veteran, evidently much flattered by his nephew's popularity with the fair sex.

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"But what else could you expect, commander?" asked Gerald. "It is not a matter of inconstancy, you see, but simply of following one's regiment, that is all. That is the reason Olivier and I were obliged to desert the beauties of Oran for the pretty shop-girls of Algiers."

"Just as a change of station compelled us to desert the bronze-cheeked maidens of Martinique for the fisher maids of St. Pierre Miquelon," remarked the old sailor, who was becoming rather lively under the influence of the Cyprian wine which had been circulating freely during the conversation.

"A very sudden change of zone, commander," remarked Gerald, nudging the veteran with his elbow. "It must have been leaving fire for ice."

"No, no, you're very much mistaken there," protested the veteran, vehemently. "I don't know what to make of it, but those fisher maidens, fair as albinos, had the very deuce in them. There was one little roly-poly with white lashes, particularly, whom they called the Whaler — "

"About the temperature of Senegambia, eh, uncle?"

"I should say so," ejaculated the veteran. And as he replaced his glass upon the table, he made a clucking sound with his tongue, but it was hard to say whether this significant sound had reference to his recollection of the fair Whaler or to the pleasant flavour of the Cyprian wine. Then suddenly recollecting himself, the worthy man exclaimed :

"Well, well, what am I thinking of? It ill becomes an old fellow like me to be talking on such subjects to youths like you! Go on, talk of your Jewesses and your duchesses as much as you please, boys. It suits your years."

"Very well, then, I insist that Olivier shall take me to Madame Herbaut's," said the persistent Gerald.

"See the result of satiety. You go in the most fash-

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ionable and aristocratic society, and yet envy us our poor little Batignollais entertainments."

"Fashionable society is not at all amusing," said Gerald. "I frequent it merely to please my mother. To-morrow, for example, will be a particularly trying day to me, for my mother gives an afternoon dance. By the way, why can't you come, Olivier?"

"Come where?"

"Why, to this dance my mother gives."

"I?"

"Yes, you! Why not?"

"I, Olivier Raymond, a private in the hussars, attend a dance given in the Faubourg St. Germain!"

"It would be very strange if I could not take my dearest friend to my mother's house merely because he has the honour to be one of the bravest soldiers in the French army. Olivier, you must come. I insist upon it."

"In jacket and kepi, I suppose," said Olivier, smilingly, referring to his poverty, which did not permit him to indulge in citizen's clothing.

Knowing how this worthy fellow spent the proceeds of his arduous toil, and knowing, too, his extreme sensitiveness in money matters, Gerald could only say in reply :

"True, I did not think of that. It is a pity, for we might have had a very pleasant time together. I could have shown you some of our fashionable beauties, though I feel sure that, so far as young and pretty faces are concerned, Madame Herbaut's entertainments have the advantage."

"Do you see, uncle, how cleverly he returns to the charge?"

The clock in the neighbouring steeple struck eight.

"Eight o'clock!" cried Olivier. "The deuce! My master mason has been waiting for me for an hour. I've got to go, Gerald. I promised to be punctual,—an hour late is a good deal. Good night, uncle."

"You're going to work half the night, again," remarked the veteran, casting a meaning look at Gerald. "I shall wait up for you, though."

"No, no, uncle, go to bed. Tell Madame Barbançon to leave the key with the porter, and some matches in the kitchen. I won't wake you, I'll come in quietly."

"Good-bye, M. Gerald," said the veteran, taking the young duke's hand, and pressing it in a very significant manner, as if to remind him of his promise in regard to Olivier's promotion.

"Good-bye, commander," said Gerald, returning the pressure, and indicating by a gesture that he read the veteran's thought. "You will permit me to come and see you again, will you not?"

"It would give me great pleasure, you may be sure of that, M. Gerald."

"Yes, commander; for I judge you by myself. Good-bye. Come, Olivier, I will accompany you to the door of your master mason."

"I shall have the pleasure of your company a quarter of an hour longer, then. Good night, uncle."

"Good night, my dear boy."

And Olivier, taking up his bundle of papers and pens, left the house arm in arm with Gerald. At the master mason's door they separated, promising to see each other again at an early day.

About an hour after Olivier left his uncle, Madame Barbançon was brought back to the Batignolles in Madame de Beaumesnil's carriage.

The veteran, amazed at the silence of his housekeeper, and at the gloomy expression of her face, addressed her several times in vain, and finally begged her to help herself to the small portion of Cyprian wine that remained. Madame Barbançon took the bottle and started towards the door, then stopped short and crossed her arms with a meditative air, a movement that caused the wine-bottle to fall with a crash upon the floor.

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“The deuce take you!” cried the veteran. “Look at the Cyprian wine you’ve wasted.”

“True, I’ve broken the bottle,” replied the house-keeper, with the air of a person just waking from a dream. “It is not surprising. Since I saw and heard Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil,—for I have just seen her, and in such a pitiable state, poor woman!—I have been racking my brain to remember something I can not remember, and I know very well that I shall be absolutely good for nothing for a long time.”

“It is a good thing to know this in advance,” replied the veteran, with his usual placidity of manner on seeing Madame Barbançon again relapse into a deeply preoccupied frame of mind.

CHAPTER V.

THE LION OF THE BALL.

ON the day following Olivier Raymond's chance meeting with Gerald, the mother of the latter gave a dancing party.

The Duchesse de Senneterre, both by birth and by marriage, was connected with the oldest and most illustrious families of France, and though her fortune was insignificant and her house small, she gave every year four or five small but extremely elegant and exclusive dancing receptions, of which she and her two young daughters did the honours with perfect grace. The Duc de Senneterre, dead for two years, had held a high office under the Restoration.

The three windows of the salon where the guests danced opened into a very pretty garden, and the day being superb, many ladies and gentlemen stepped out for a chat or a stroll through the paths bordered with flowering shrubs during the intervals between the dances.

Four or five men, chancing to meet near a big clump of lilacs, had paused to exchange the airy nothings that generally compose the conversation at such a gathering.

Among this group were two men that merit attention. One, a man about thirty-five years of age, but already obese, with an extremely pompous, indolent, and supercilious manner and a lack-lustre eye, was the Comte de Mornand, the same man who had been mentioned at Commander Bernard's the evening before, when Olivier

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and Gerald were comparing their reminiscences of college life.

M. de Mornand occupied a hereditary seat in the Chamber of Peers.

The other, an intimate friend of the count, was a man of about the same age,— tall, slim, angular, a trifle round-shouldered, and also a little bald,— whose flat head, prominent and rather bloodshot eyes imparted an essentially reptilian character to his visage. This was the Baron de Ravil. Though his means of support were problematical in the extreme when compared with his luxurious style of living, the baron was still received in the aristocratic society in which his birth entitled him to a place, but never did any intriguer — we use the word in its lowest, most audacious sense — display more brazen effrontry or daring impudence.

“Have you seen the lion of the ball?” inquired one of the men of the party, addressing M. de Mornand.

“I have but just arrived, and have no idea to whom you refer,” replied the count.

“Why, the Marquis de Maillefert.”

“That cursed hunchback!” exclaimed M. de Ravil; “it is all his fault that this affair seems so unconscionably dull. His hideous presence is enough to cast a damper over any festivity.”

“How strange it is that the marquis appears in society for a few weeks, now and then, and then suddenly disappears again,” remarked another member of the group.

“I believe he is a manufacturer of counterfeit money and emerges from his seclusion, now and then, to put his spurious coin in circulation,” remarked M. de Ravil. “This much is certain — incomprehensible as it appears — he actually loaned me a thousand franc note, which I shall never return, the other night, at the card-table. And what do you suppose the impudent creature said as he handed it to me? ‘It will afford me so much amusement to dun you for it, baron.’ He need have

no fears. He will amuse himself in that way a long time."

"But all jesting aside, this marquis is a very peculiar man," remarked another member of the party. "His mother, the old Marquise de Maillefort, left him a very handsome fortune, but no one can imagine what he does with his money, for he lives very modestly."

"I used to meet him quite frequently at poor Madame de Beaumesnil's."

"By the way, do you know they say she is said to be lying at the point of death?"

"Madame de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes; she is about to receive the last sacrament. At least that is what they told Madame de Mirecourt, who stopped to inquire for her on her way here."

"Her case must, indeed, have been incurable, then, for her physician is that famous Doctor Gasterini, who is as great a savant as he is a gourmand, which is certainly saying a good deal."

"Poor woman! she is young to die."

"And what an immense fortune her daughter will have," exclaimed M. de Mornand. "She will be the richest heiress in France, and an orphan besides. What a rare titbit for a fortune-hunter!"

As he uttered these words, M. de Mornand's eyes encountered those of his friend Ravil.

Both started slightly, as if the same idea had suddenly occurred to both of them. With a single look they must have read each other's thoughts.

"The richest heiress in France!"

"And an orphan!"

"And an immense landed property besides!" exclaimed the three other men in accents of undisguised covetousness.

After which, one of them, without noticing the interchange of glances between M. de Mornand and his friend, continued:

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“And how old is this Mlle. de Beaumesnil?”

“Not over fifteen,” replied M. de Ravil, “and exceedingly unprepossessing in appearance, sickly and positively insignificant looking, in fact.”

“Sickly,—that is not objectionable, by any means, quite the contrary,” said one of the party, reflectively.

“And homely?” remarked another, turning to Ravil.
“You have seen her, then?”

“Not I, but one of my aunts saw the girl at the Convent of the Sacred Heart before Beaumesnil took her to Italy by the physician’s order.”

“Poor Beaumesnil, to die in Naples from a fall from his horse!”

“And you say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is very homely?” he continued, while M. de Mornand seemed to grow more and more thoughtful.

“Hideous! I think it more than likely that she’s going into a decline, too, from what I hear,” responded Ravil, disparagingly; “for, after Beaumesnil’s death, the physician who had accompanied them to Naples declared that he would not be responsible for the result if Mlle. de Beaumesnil returned to France. She is a consumptive, I tell you, a hopeless consumptive.”

“A consumptive heiress!” exclaimed another man ecstatically. “Can any one conceive of a more delightful combination!”

“Ah, yes, I understand,” laughed Ravil, “but it is absolutely necessary that the girl should live long enough for a man to marry her, which Mlle. de Beaumesnil is not likely to do. She is doomed. I heard this through M. de la Rochaiguë, her nearest relative. And he ought to know, as the property comes to him at her death, if she doesn’t marry. Perhaps that accounts for his being so sanguine.”

“What a lucky thing it would be for Madame de la Rochaiguë, who is so fond of luxury and society!”

“Yes, in other people’s houses.”

"It is very strange, but it seems to me I have heard that Mlle. de Beaumesnil strongly resembles her mother, who used to be one of the prettiest women in Paris," remarked another gentleman.

"This girl is atrociously ugly, I tell you," said M. de Ravil. "In fact, I'm not sure that she isn't deformed as well."

"Yes," remarked M. de Mornand, awakening from his reverie, "several other persons have said the very same thing about the girl that Ravil does."

"But why didn't her mother accompany her to Italy?"

"Because the poor woman had already been attacked by the strange malady to which she is about to succumb, it seems. People say that it was a terrible disappointment to her because she could not follow her daughter to Naples, and that this disappointment has contributed not a little to her present hopeless state."

"It would seem, then, that Doctor Dupont's musical cure has proved a failure."

"What musical cure?"

"Knowing Madame de Beaumesnil's passionate love of music, the doctor, to mitigate his patient's sufferings and arouse her from her langour, ordered that soft and soothing music should be played or sung to her."

"Not a bad idea, though revived from the times of Saul and David," commented Ravil.

"Well, what was the result?"

"Madame de Beaumesnil seemed benefited at first, they say, but her malady soon regained the ascendancy."

"I have heard that poor Beaumesnil's sudden death was a terrible shock to her."

"Bah!" exclaimed M. de Mornand, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, "she never cared a straw for Beaumesnil. She only married him for his millions of millions. Besides, as a young girl she had any number of lovers. In short," continued M. de Mornand,

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puffing out his cheeks with an air of supercilious dignity, "Madame de Beaumesnil is really a woman of no reputation whatever, and, in spite of the enormous fortune she will leave, no honourable man would ever be willing to marry the daughter of such a mother."

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed a voice which seemed to respond indignantly to M. de Mornand's last words from behind the clump of lilacs.

There was a moment of amazed silence; then M. de Mornand, purple with anger, made a hasty circuit of the clump of shrubbery. He found no one there, however. The path at this place making an abrupt turn, the person who uttered the opprobrious epithet could make his escape with comparative ease.

"There are no more infamous scoundrels than the persons who insult others without daring to show themselves," cried M. de Mornand, in a loud voice.

This strange incident had scarcely taken place before the sound of the orchestra drew the promenaders back to the salon.

M. de Mornand being left alone with Ravil, the latter said to him:

"Somebody who dared not show himself called you a scoundrel. We had better say no more about it. But did you understand me?"

"Perfectly. The same idea suddenly, I might almost say simultaneously, occurred to me, and for an instant I was dazzled — even dazed by it."

"An income of over three millions! What an incorruptible minister you will be, eh?"

"Hush! It is enough to turn one's brain."

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a third party, who, addressing M. de Mornand, said, with the most scrupulous politeness:

"Monsieur, will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis?"

M. de Mornand's surprise was so great that he started

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back without uttering a word on hearing this request, for the person who had just made it was no other than the Marquis de Maillefort, the singular hunchback, of whom frequent mention has already been made in these pages.

There was also another feeling that prevented M. de Mornand from immediately replying to this strange proposition, for, in the full, vibrating voice of the speaker, M. de Mornand fancied, for an instant, that he recognised the voice of the unseen person who had called him a scoundrel when he spoke in such disparaging terms of Madame de Beaumesnil.

The Marquis de Maillefort, pretending not to notice the air of displeased surprise with which M. de Mornand had greeted the proposal, repeated in the same tone of scrupulous politeness :

“ Monsieur, will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis in the next quadrille ? ”

On hearing this request on the part of the deformed man thus reiterated, M. de Mornand, without concealing his desire to laugh, exclaimed :

“ Act as your vis-à-vis, — yours, monsieur ? ”

“ Yes, monsieur,” replied the marquis, with the most innocent air imaginable.

“ But, — but what you ask is — is — permit me to say — very remarkable.”

“ And very dangerous, my dear marquis,” added the Baron de Ravil, with his usual sneer.

“ As for you, baron, I might put a no less offensive and, perhaps, even more dangerous question to you,” retorted the marquis, smiling. “ When will you return the thousand francs I had the pleasure of loaning to you the other evening ? ”

“ You are too inquisitive, marquis.”

“ Come, come, baron, don’t treat M. de Talleyrand’s *bon mots* as you treat thousand franc notes.”

“ What do you mean by that, marquis ? ”

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"I mean that it costs you no more to put one in circulation than the other."

M. de Ravil bit his lip.

"This explanation is not altogether satisfactory, M. le marquis," he said, coldly.

"You have an unquestionable right to be very exacting in the matter of explanations, baron," retorted the marquis, in the same tone of contemptuous persiflage; "but you have no right to be indiscreet, as you certainly are at this moment. I had the honour to address M. de Mornand, and you intrude yourself into our conversation, which is exceedingly annoying to me."

Then, turning to M. de Mornand, the hunchback continued:

"You did me the honour, just now, to say that my request that you would act as my vis-à-vis was very remarkable, I believe."

"Yes, monsieur," replied M. de Mornand, quite gravely this time, for he began to suspect that this singular proposal was only a pretext, and the longer he listened to the voice, the more certain he became that it was the same which had styled him a scoundrel. "Yes, monsieur," he continued, with mingled hauteur and assurance, "I did say, and I repeat it, that this request to act as your vis-à-vis was very remarkable on your part."

"And why, may I ask, if you do not think me too inquisitive?"

"Because—why—because it is—it is, I think, very singular that—"

Then as M. de Mornand did not finish the sentence:

"I have a rather peculiar habit, monsieur," the marquis said, lightly.

"What is it, monsieur?"

"Having the misfortune to be a hunchback and consequently an object of ridicule, I have reserved for myself the exclusive right to ridicule my deformity,

and as I flatter myself I do that to the satisfaction of people in general — excuse my conceit, monsieur, I beg — I do not permit any one to do badly what I do so well myself."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed M. de Mornand, vehemently.

"Permit me to give you an example," continued the marquis in the same airy tone, "I just asked you to do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis. Ah, well, instead of answering, 'Yes, monsieur,' or 'No, monsieur,' in a polite manner, you respond in a voice choked with laughter, 'Your request for me to act as your vis-à-vis is very remarkable.' And when I ask you to finish the sentence, you hesitate and stammer and say nothing."

"But, monsieur —"

"But, monsieur," hastily exclaimed the hunchback, interrupting his companion afresh; "if, instead of being polite, you are disposed to enjoy yourself at my expense, you ought to say something decidedly impertinent, as, for example: 'M. de Maillefort, I have a horror of deformities and really cannot bear the idea of seeing you dance;' or 'Really, M. de Maillefort, I have too much pride to show myself in the back to back figure with you.' So you see, my dear M. de Mornand," continued the hunchback, with increasing jovialness, "that, as I can ridicule myself better than any one else can, I am perfectly right not to allow any one else to do clumsily what I can do so admirably myself."

"You say that you will not allow," began M. de Mornand, impatiently —

"Come, come, Mornand, this is all nonsense," exclaimed Ravil. "And, you, marquis, are much too sensible a man —"

"That is not the question," replied Mornand, hotly. "This gentleman says he will not allow —"

"Any person to ridicule me," interrupted the marquis. "No, I will not tolerate it for a single instant; I repeat it."

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"But Mornand certainly never thought for a single instant of ridiculing you, I am sure, marquis," cried Ravil.

"Is that true, baron?"

"Yes, certainly, certainly."

"Then the gentleman will do me the favour to explain what he meant by his reply."

"That is very simple. I will volunteer—"

"My dear Ravil," interposed M. de Mornand, firmly, "you are going entirely too far. As M. de Maillefort descends to sarcasm and threats, I deem it proper to refuse him any explanation whatever, and M. de Maillefort is at perfect liberty to impute any meaning he pleases to my words."

"Impute any meaning to your words?" exclaimed the hunchback, laughing. "Really, I could not take any such task as that upon myself. That is the business of your honourable colleagues in the Chamber of Peers when you treat them to one of those superb speeches—which you alone have the ability to understand—"

"Let us put an end to this," exclaimed M. de Mornand, exasperated beyond endurance. "Consider my words as insulting as any words could possibly be, monsieur."

"You are mad," cried Ravil. "All this is, or will be, supremely ridiculous if taken seriously."

"You are right, my poor baron," said the marquis, with a contrite air; "it will become supremely ridiculous as you say, but, monsieur, see what a good fellow I am, I will be content with the following apology made verbally by M. de Mornand in the presence of three or four witnesses of my own choosing: 'M. le Marquis de Maillefort, I very humbly and contritely ask your pardon for having dared—'"

"Enough, monsieur!" exclaimed M. de Mornand. "You must believe me either a coward or an egregious fool."

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"So you refuse the reparation I demand ?" asked the marquis ; "you refuse it, absolutely ?"

"Absolutely, monsieur, absolutely."

"Then I feel obliged to terminate this interview as I began it, by again having the honour to say to you : 'Will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis ?'"

"What, monsieur, as your vis-à-vis ?" repeated M. de Mornand, in profound astonishment.

"My vis-à-vis in a *danse à deux*," added the hunchback, with a meaning gesture. "Do you understand me ?"

"A duel — with you ?" cried M. de Mornand, who, in his first transport of anger, had forgotten the high social position of the hunchback, and the ridicule which would be heaped upon him if he engaged in a personal encounter with such an adversary. "A duel with you, monsieur ? Really —"

"Are you going to plead as an excuse that such a position would be too — too remarkable or too dangerous, as your friend Ravil would say ?"

"No, monsieur, I do not consider it too dangerous — but too ridiculous."

"Yes, frightfully ridiculous to you, as I remarked to your honest friend here a moment ago."

"Really, gentlemen," exclaimed Ravil, "I will never permit —"

Then seeing Gerald de Senneterre passing through the garden, he added :

"Here comes the Duc de Senneterre, the son of the house. I shall ask him to assist me in putting a stop to this foolish quarrel."

"Yes, gentlemen, the duke's coming is most opportune," replied the hunchback. And turning towards the young man, he called out :

"Gerald, my friend, we need your assistance."

"What is the matter, marquis ?" asked Gerald, in a manner that was both deferential and affectionate.

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"Have you any cigars?"

"Plenty of them, marquis."

"Well, my dear Gerald, these gentlemen and I are dying to smoke. Won't you take us up to your rooms?"

"Certainly," replied Gerald, gaily. "I have no engagement for this dance, so I have a quarter of an hour at my disposal."

"That is all the time we shall need," said the hunch-back, with a meaning look at Mornand and Ravil. "Come, gentlemen," he added, taking Gerald's arm and walking on ahead of the future minister and his friend.

A minute or two afterwards the four gentlemen reached Gerald's apartments, which consisted of three rooms,—one, extremely large, on the third floor of the house.

The young duke having politely begged Messieurs de Mornand and de Ravil to pass in first, M. de Maillefort, locking the door and slipping the key in his pocket, remarked to Gerald :

"Allow me, my friend."

"But why do you lock the door, M. le marquis," asked Gerald, greatly surprised.

"So we shall not be disturbed," answered the hunch-back, "but be able to smoke in peace."

"You are certainly a very cautious man, M. le marquis," said Gerald, laughing, as he ushered the party into the furthermost room, which, being much larger than the others, served both as a sitting-room and study for the young duke.

Upon one of the panels in this room hung a large shield covered with crimson velvet, on which quite a number of weapons were displayed.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DUEL.

ON seeing the Marquis de Maillefort lock the door of the apartment, M. de Mornand partially divined the hunchback's intentions, and any lingering doubts he may have felt were promptly dispelled when the marquis untied his cravat and hastily divested himself of both coat and waistcoat, to the great astonishment of Gerald, who had just turned to approach him with an open box of cigars in his hand.

Almost at the same instant, the marquis, pointing to two swords hanging with the other weapons on the shield, said to the young man :

“ My dear Gerald, have the goodness to measure those swords with M. de Ravil, and give the longest to my adversary if there is any difference in them. You know the proverb, ‘ Hunchbacks have long arms.’ ”

“ What ! ” exclaimed Gerald, in profound astonishment, “ those swords ? ”

“ Certainly, my friend. This is the situation in two words. That gentleman (pointing to Mornand) has just been extremely impertinent to me. He refused to apologise, and the time has now passed when I would accept any apology, even if he would consent to make it. There is consequently nothing for us to do but fight. You will act as my second ; M. de Ravil will act in the same capacity for M. de Mornand, and we will settle our differences here and now.”

Then, turning to his antagonist, the marquis added :

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"Come, monsieur, off with your coat. Gerald has only a quarter of an hour to spare, and we must make the most of it."

"What a pity Olivier could not witness this scene!" thought Gerald, who had recovered from his astonishment, and who now began to regard the adventure as extremely piquant, the more so as he had very little sympathy for Messieurs Mornand and Ravil, and a very warm affection for the marquis.

But though the hunchback had made this open declaration of war, M. de Ravil turned to Gerald, and said, in a tone of profound conviction:

"You must feel that such a duel as this is entirely out of the question, M. le duc?"

"And why, monsieur?" inquired Gerald, dryly.

"Thanks, Gerald," exclaimed the marquis. "The swords, my friend, quick, the swords!"

"But think of permitting such an encounter in your mother's house! It must not be, M. le duc. Think of it, a duel, in a room in your house, and for the most trivial cause," insisted Ravil, as he saw Gerald walk to the panel and take down the swords.

"I consider myself the sole judge of the propriety of what occurs in my apartments," retorted Gerald. "There are numerous instances of similar duels, are there not, M. de Mornand?"

"Any place is suitable for avenging an affront, M. le duc," was the prompt and angry reply.

"Bravo! the Cid never made a better retort!" exclaimed the hunchback. "Come, my dear M. de Mornand, off with your coat! It is hardly fair that I, who am not exactly modelled after the Apollo Belvedere, should be the first to strip."

M. de Mornand, at his wit's end, pulled off his coat.

"I absolutely refuse to act as second in such a duel," shouted M. de Ravil.

"You can do as you please about that," responded

the hunchback. "I have the key of the door in my pocket, but you can look out of the window, or beat a tattoo upon the pane, if you prefer. That little act of bravado might have a good effect on M. de Mornand, perhaps."

"De Ravil, measure the swords, I beg of you," cried the other principal in the affair.

"You insist?"

"I do."

"So be it,—but you are mad."

Then, turning to Gerald, he added, "You are taking a great responsibility upon yourself, monsieur."

"That will do, monsieur," replied Gerald, coldly.

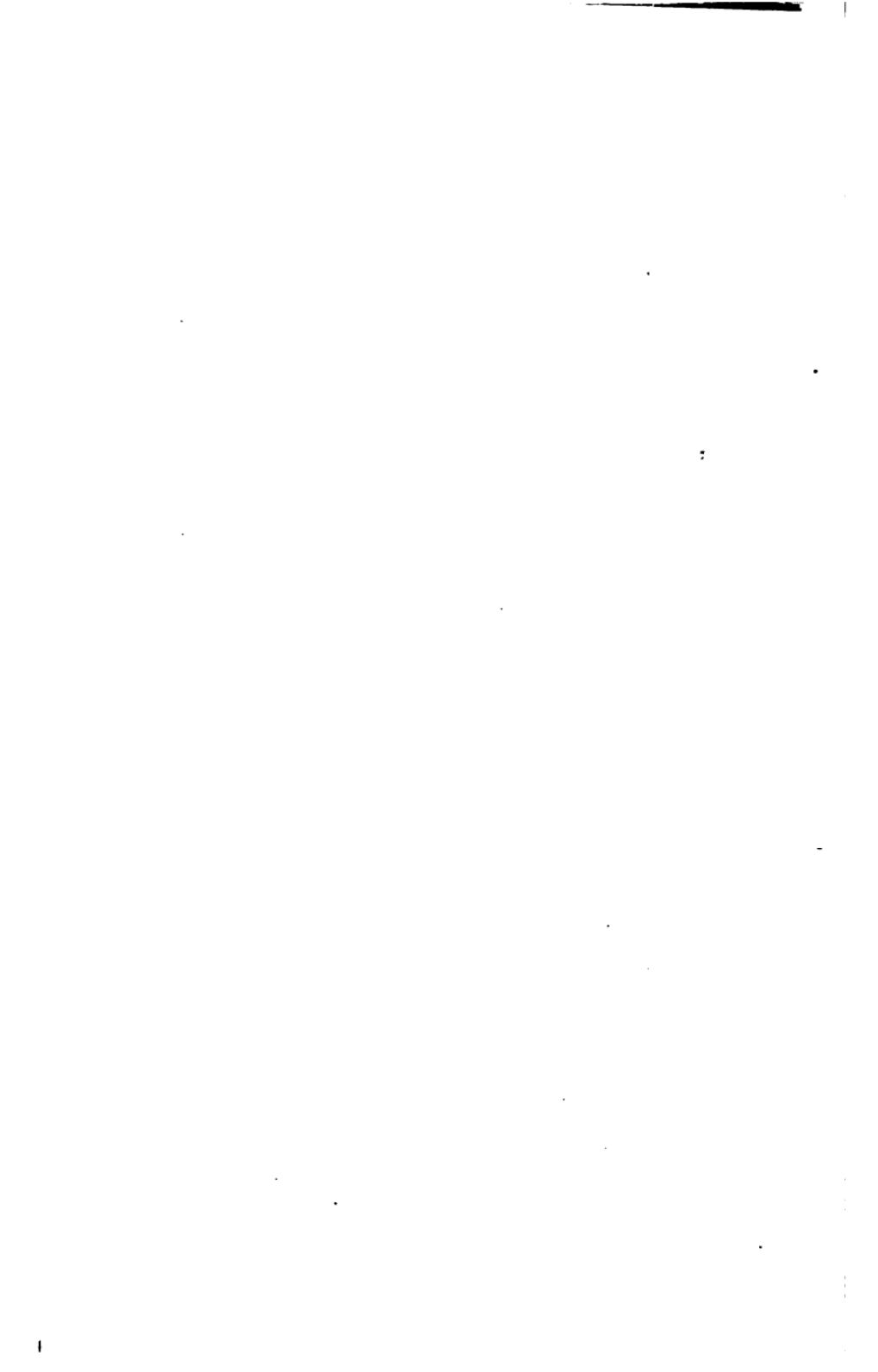
The proverb the marquis had quoted seemed a true one, for, when that gentleman rolled his shirt-sleeve up above his elbow, there was disclosed to view a long, thin, but sinewy arm, upon which the muscles stood out like whipcords, while his opponent's arm was plump and soft.

The outcome of the encounter was apparent from the manner in which the antagonists fell into position, and in which they crossed blades, when Gerald, after having exchanged glances with Ravil, gave the signal for the combat to begin.

Not that M. de Mornand evinced any signs of cowardice! On the contrary, he manifested the courage which any well-bred man is almost sure to display, but he was unmistakably nervous, and, though he showed a fair knowledge of fencing, his play was characterised by excessive prudence. He held himself out of reach as much as possible, and always upon the defensive, parrying his antagonist's thrusts skilfully enough, but never attacking.

For a single instant Ravil, and even Gerald, were terrified at the expression of ferocious hatred that over-spread the features of the marquis when he confronted his adversary, but, suddenly recovering himself, he be-







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came the same gay, mocking cynic as at the beginning of this strange scene, and, as the look of sullen rage he had concentrated upon M. de Mornand softened, his thrusts became less violent and murderous, and, at last, wishing doubtless to end the affair, he made a feint. M. de Mornand responded ingenuously, whereupon his opponent, with a quick, upward thrust, ran his blade through his antagonist's right arm.

At the sight of blood, Gerald and Ravil both sprang forward, exclaiming :

“Enough, gentlemen, enough !”

Both men lowered their swords on hearing this exclamation, and the marquis said, in a clear voice :

“I declare myself satisfied ; I will even humbly beg your pardon — for being a hunchback, M. de Mornand. It is the only excuse I can reasonably offer you.”

“It is sufficient, monsieur,” said M. de Mornand, with a bitter smile, while Gerald and De Ravil bound up the wounded arm with the aid of a handkerchief.

This done, the two men re-dressed themselves, after which M. de Mallefort said to M. de Mornand :

“Will you grant me the favour of a moment's conversation in another room ?”

“I am at your service.”

“Will you permit it, Gerald ?”

“Certainly,” replied the young duke.

The two gentlemen having stepped into Gerald's bedroom, the hunchback said, in his usual mocking way :

“Though it may be in very poor taste to speak of one's generosity, my dear sir, I am obliged to admit that for a minute or two I felt strongly inclined to kill you, and that it would have been a very easy matter for me to do it.”

“You should have availed yourself of the opportunity, monsieur.”

“But I reflected —”

“And with what object ?”

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“ You will excuse me, I am sure, for not opening my whole heart to you, but permit me to beg that you will consider the slight wound you have just received merely an aid to memory.”

“ I do not understand you in the least, monsieur.”

“ You know, of course, that one often places a bit of paper in one’s snuff-box, or ties a knot in the corner of one’s handkerchief, to remind one of a rendezvous or a promise.”

“ Yes, monsieur ; and what of it, may I ask ?”

“ I am strongly in hopes that the slight wound which I have just given you in the arm will serve as such an effectual reminder that the date of this little episode will never be effaced from your memory.”

“ And why are you so desirous that this date should be indelibly engraved upon my memory ?”

“ The explanation is very simple. I wish to fix the date in your memory in an ineffaceable manner,—because it is quite possible that I shall some time have occasion to remind you of *all you have said* this afternoon.”

“ Remind me of all I have said this afternoon ?”

“ Yes, monsieur, and in the presence of irrefutable witnesses that I shall summon in case of need.”

“ I understand you less and less, monsieur.”

“ I see no particular advantage in your understanding me any better just at this time, my dear sir, so you must permit me to take leave of you, and go and bid my friend Gerald good-bye.”

It is easy to comprehend that the real cause of M. de Maillefort’s challenge to M. de Mornand was the insulting manner in which that gentleman had spoken of Madame de Beaumesnil, for the latter’s suspicions were correct, and it was the hunchback who, unseen, had cried, “ Scoundrel !” on hearing M. de Mornand’s coarse words.

But why had M. de Maillefort, who was usually so

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frank and outspoken, taken this roundabout way to secure a pretext for avenging the insult offered to Madame de Beaumesnil ? And what could be his object in wishing to remind M. de Mornand of this special day, and in perhaps calling him to account for all he had just said in the presence of reliable witnesses ?

These questions will be satisfactorily answered as the story proceeds.

The Marquis de Maillefort had just bidden Gerald good-bye, when one of the servants brought the young duke the following letter, written by Olivier that same morning.

“ MY GOOD GERALD:—‘Man proposes and God disposes,’ and last night, Providence, in the shape of my worthy master mason, decided that I must absent myself from Paris for a fortnight or three weeks, and I am truly sorry, for there can be no repetition of our pleasant dinner-party of yesterday for a long time to come.

“ The fact is, my master mason is a very poor arithmetician, and he has become so mixed up in his specifications for some work he is to do in a château near Luzarches that it is impossible for me to make head or tail of his figures. For me to be able to cast any light on this portentous gloom, I shall be obliged to go through a host of measurements which I shall have to take myself, if I would avoid more puzzles, and this will necessitate a prolonged absence, I fear. I never told you, did I ? that my master mason was formerly a sergeant in the engineer corps, a brave, honest, plain, kind-hearted man, and you know that life with people of that sort is easy and pleasant. One of my chief reasons, too, for going to his assistance is that, so far as I am able to judge, he is cheating himself badly,—such a rare thing in these days that I shall not be sorry to verify the fact.

“ I leave my uncle — what a heart of gold he has, hasn’t he ? — with no little anxiety. Ever since Madame

Barbançon was brought back to us in Madame de Beau-mesnil's superb equipage she has been in a truly alarming frame of mind, and I tremble for my uncle's digestion. She has not so much as mentioned Bonaparte's name, and seems to be in a brown study all the time,—pauses thoughtfully in the garden, and every now and then stands stock-still in her kitchen with eyes fixed upon vacancy. She gave us sour milk this morning, and the eggs were like leather. So take heed, my dear Gerald, if you should happen to drop in at meal-time. It is evident, too, that Madame Barbançon is burning with a desire to be questioned concerning the particulars of her recent visit, but very naturally my uncle and I avoid the subject, as there is really something strange and even incomprehensible about the affair.

“If you have time, drop in and see my uncle. It would please him very much, for he will miss me sadly, I fear, and he has taken a great fancy to you. What ineffable kindness of heart and unwavering uprightness of soul are concealed beneath his plain exterior! Ah, my dear Gerald, I have never craved wealth for myself, but I tremble to think that, at his age and with his infirmities, my uncle will have more and more difficulty in living on his modest pay, in spite of all the little privations he endures so courageously. And if he should become really ill,—for two of his wounds reopen frequently,—sickness is so hard upon the poor? Ah, Gerald, the thought is a cruel one to me.

“Forgive me, my friend and brother. I began this letter cheerfully, and it has become really funereal in tone. Good-bye, Gerald, good-bye. Write me at Luzarches.

“Yours devotedly,
“OLIVIER RAYMOND.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRETTY MUSICIAN.

ABOUT seven o'clock on the evening of the same day on which M. de Maillefort's duel took place, and just as the sun was beginning to vanish from sight in a bank of dark clouds that indicated a stormy night,—for occasional big drops of rain were already falling,—a young girl was crossing the Place de la Concorde, in the direction of the Faubourg Ste. Honoré.

This girl carried under her left arm two large music books whose shabby bindings attested to long and faithful service; in her right hand she held a small umbrella. Her attire, which was modest in the extreme, consisted of a plain black silk dress with a small mantle of the same material, and, though the spring was already far advanced, she wore on her head a gray felt hat tied under the chin with broad ribbons of the same quiet hue. A few soft, curling tresses of golden hair, which the wind had loosened from their confinement, caressed her low, broad forehead, and made a lovely frame for her sweet, youthful face, which wore an expression of profound sadness, but which was also instinct with refinement, modesty, and quiet dignity. This same natural dignity manifested itself in the thoughtful and rather proud expression of the girl's large blue eyes. Her bearing was graceful and distinguished, and though her mantle concealed her figure, one instinctively felt that it was not only lithe, but perfect in contour, for her

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garments were worn with such an air of distinction that one forgot their shabbiness.

As she lifted her dress slightly in crossing a gutter, a pretty foot, clad in a neat, well-fitting, though rather thick-soled shoe, was disclosed to view, and one also caught a glimpse of a petticoat of dazzling whiteness, edged with a narrow lace-trimmed ruffle.

At the corner of the Rue des Champs Élysées, a beggar woman, with a child in her arms, addressed a few words to her in an imploring voice, whereupon the girl paused, and after a moment's embarrassment,—for having both hands occupied, one with her music books and the other with her umbrella, she could not get at her pocket,—she solved the difficulty by confiding the music books temporarily to the poor woman's care, and transferring her umbrella to her other hand. This done, the girl drew out her purse, which contained barely four francs in small change, and, taking from it a two sous piece, said hurriedly, but in tones of entrancing sweetness :

“Forgive me, good mother, forgive me for being unable to offer you more.”

Then, with a compassionate glance at the pale face of the infant which the woman was pressing to her breast, she added :

“Poor little thing! May God preserve it to you!” Then resuming possession of her music books, and casting another glance of tender commiseration on the poor creatures, she continued on her way down the Champs Élysées.

We have dwelt upon the apparently trivial details of this act of charity, merely because they seem to us so significant. The gift, though trifling in value, had not been given haughtily or thoughtlessly; nor was the young girl content with dropping a bit of money into the outstretched hand. There was also another circumstance which, though trivial, was highly significant:

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the young girl had removed her glove before proffering her alms — as she would have done before touching the hand of a friend and equal.

It so happened that M. de Ravil, who had just escorted his wounded friend to his home on the Rue de Madeleine, met the young girl on the pavement of the Rue des Champs Élysées, and, struck by her beauty and by the distinguished bearing which contrasted so strongly with the excessive plainness of her attire, he paused a moment directly in front of her and eyed her cynically, then, as she walked quickly on, he turned and followed her.

As she turned into the Rue de l'Arcade, a street little frequented at that hour of the day, he quickened his pace, and, overtaking the fair unknown, said, insolently :

“ Mademoiselle gives music lessons, I judge ? Will she be kind enough to come and give me one — at my house ?”

As he spoke he laid his hand upon the arm of the girl, who turned quickly with a faint cry ; then, though her cheeks were crimson with terror and emotion, she cast such a look of withering scorn on Ravil that, in spite of his natural impudence, his eyes fell, and bowing low before the unknown with an air of ironical deference, he said :

“ Pardon me, madame la princesse, I was mistaken in the person.”

The girl continued on her way, forcing herself to walk quietly in spite of her painful anxiety, for the house to which she going was only a short distance off now.

“ All the same, I intend to follow her and see who this shabbily dressed girl who gives herself the airs of a duchess is,” Ravil said to himself.

The comparison was an eminently just one, though he did not know it, for Herminie — that was the girl's name ; in fact, being a foundling, she had no other —

for Herminie was indeed a duchess, if one means by that word a charming combination of beauty, grace, and natural refinement, accompanied by that indomitable pride which is inherent in every fastidious and sensitive nature.

It has been truly said that many duchesses, both as regards appearance and instincts, were born *lorettes*; while, on the other hand, many poor creatures of the most obscure origin were born duchesses.

Herminie herself was certainly a living example of the truth of this assertion, for the friends she had made in her humble rôle of singing and piano teacher always called her the duchess,—a few from jealousy, for even the most generous and unassuming of people have their detractors, others, on the contrary, because the term best expressed the impression Herminie's manner and appearance made upon them. It is hardly necessary to say that the young lady in question was no other than the duchess of whom Olivier had made frequent mention during the dinner at Commander Bernard's house.

Herminie, still closely followed by Ravil, soon left the Rue de l'Arcade for the Rue d'Anjou, where she entered an imposing mansion, thus escaping the annoying pursuit of that cynical personage.

"How strange!" he exclaimed, pausing a few yards off. "Why the devil is that girl going into the Hôtel de Beaumesnil with her music books under her arm. She certainly cannot live there."

Then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "But now I think of it, this must be the female David who is trying to assuage Madame de Beaumesnil's sufferings by the charm of her music. That lady might well be likened to good King Saul by reason of her great wealth, which will all go to that young girl in whom my friend Mornand already feels such an interest. As for me, that pretty musician who has just entered the home

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of the countess suits my fancy. I mean to wait until she comes out, for I must find out where she lives."

The expression of melancholy on Herminie's charming face deepened as she crossed the threshold, and, passing the porter without speaking, as any member of the household might have done, entered the magnificent hall of this sumptuous abode.

It was still daylight, but the entire lower floor was brilliantly lighted. As she noted this fact, her surprise changed to anguish, which increased when she saw none of the footmen who were usually in attendance.

A profound stillness pervaded the mansion as the young girl, with her heart throbbing almost to bursting, mounted the handsome stairway to a broad landing, which commanded a view of a long line of large and magnificently furnished apartments.

These rooms, too, were brilliantly lighted but also deserted, and the pale light of the candles, contending with the glowing rays of the setting sun, produced a very strange and most unnatural effect.

Herminie, unable to account for the poignant anxiety to which she was a prey, hurried breathlessly on through several rooms, then paused suddenly.

It seemed to her that she could hear stifled sobs in the distance.

At last she reached a door leading into a long picture-gallery, and at the farther end of this gallery Herminie saw all the inmates of the mansion kneeling just outside the threshold of an open door.

A terrible presentiment seized the young girl. When she left Madame de Beaumesnil the evening before, that lady was alarmingly, though not hopelessly ill; but now, these lights, this lugubrious silence, broken only by smothered sobs, indicated beyond a doubt that Madame de Beaumesnil was receiving the last sacrament.

The young girl, overcome with grief and terror, felt that her strength was deserting her, and instinctively

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clutched at one of the consoles for support; then, endeavouring to conceal her emotion and her tears, again hastened on with tottering steps towards the group of servants in the open doorway of Madame de Beaumesnil's chamber, and knelt there in the midst of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE UNHAPPY SECRET.

THROUGH the open doorway before which Herminie had just knelt, she could see by the wan light of an alabaster lamp Madame de Beaumesnil, a woman only about thirty-eight years of age, but frightfully pale and emaciated. The countess, who was sitting up in bed, supported by pillows, had her hands clasped devoutly. Her features, once of rare beauty, were drawn and haggard, her large eyes, formerly of a clear, bright blue, had lost their lustre, though they were riveted with mingled anxiety and anguish upon the face of Abbé Ledoux, her parish priest, who had just administered the last sacrament.

A minute before Herminie's arrival, Madame de Beaumesnil, lowering her voice still more, though weakness and suffering had already reduced it to little more than a faint whisper, had said to the priest:

“Ah, my father, forgive me, but even at this solemn hour I cannot help thinking with even more bitterness of heart of that poor child,—my other daughter,—the unhappy fruit of a sin which has burdened my life with the most poignant remorse.”

“Hush, madame,” replied the priest, who, as he cast a furtive glance at the kneeling servants, had just seen Herminie take her place in their midst; “hush, madame, she is here.”

“She is ?”

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“ Yes, she came in a moment ago, and is now kneeling with your people.”

As he spoke, the priest turned and walked towards the door to close it, after having first intimated by a gesture that the sad ceremony was over.

“ I remember now — that yesterday — when Herminie left me — I begged her to return to-day at this very hour. The physician was right, — the angelic voice of the dear child, her tender melodies, have often assuaged my sufferings.”

“ Take care, madame. Be more prudent, I beg of you,” pleaded the priest, alone now with the invalid.

“ Oh, I am. My daughter suspects nothing,” answered Madame de Beaumesnil, with a bitter smile.

“ That is quite probable,” said the priest, “ for it was only chance, or, rather, the inscrutable will of Providence, that brought this young woman to your notice a short time ago. Doubtless it is the Saviour’s will that you should be subjected to a still harder test.”

“ Hard, indeed, my father, since I shall be obliged to depart from this life without ever having said ‘ my daughter ’ to this unfortunate girl. Alas ! I shall carry my wretched secret with me to the grave.”

“ Your vow imposes this sacrifice upon you, madame. It is a sacred obligation,” said the priest, severely. “ To break your vow, to thus perjure yourself, would be sacrilege.”

“ I have never thought of perjuring myself, my father,” replied Madame de Beaumesnil, despondently ; “ but God is punishing me cruelly. I am dying, and yet I am forced to treat as a stranger my own child, — who is there — only a few feet from me, kneeling among my people, and who must never know that I am her mother.”

“ Your sin was great, madame. The expiation must be correspondingly great.”

“ But how long it has lasted for me, my father.

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Faithful to my vow, I never even tried to discover what had become of my unfortunate child. Alas! but for the chance which brought her to my notice a few days ago, I should have died without having seen her for seventeen years."

"These thoughts are very sinful, my daughter," said the priest, sternly. "They caused you to take a most imprudent step yesterday."

"Have no fears, my father. It is impossible that the woman I sent for yesterday, openly, in order to avert any suspicion, should suspect my motive in asking for information which she alone could give."

"And this information?"

"Confirmed — as I anticipated — in the most irrefutable manner — what I already knew — that Herminie is my daughter."

"But why do you feel so sure of this woman's discretion?"

"Because she lost all trace of my daughter after their separation sixteen years ago."

"But are you sure this woman did not recognise you?"

"I confessed to you, my father, that I had a mask on my face when I brought Herminie into the world with this woman's aid, and yesterday, in my interview with her, I found it easy to convince her that the mother of the child I was inquiring about had been dead for several years."

"It is necessary that I should grant you absolution for this act of deception," answered Abbé Ledoux, with great severity. "You can see now the fatal consequences of your criminal solicitude for a person who, after your vow, should always have remained a stranger to you."

"Ah, that oath which remorse and gratitude for the most generous forgiveness extorted from me! I have often cursed it,—but I have always kept it, my father."

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“And yet, my sister, even at such an hour as this, your every thought is given to that young girl.”

“No, not my every thought, my father, for I have another child. But alas! I cannot prevent my heart from throbbing faster at the approach of Herminie, who is also my daughter. Can I prevent my heart from going out to her? I may have courage to control my lips, to guard my eyes, and to conceal my feelings when Herminie is with me, but I cannot prevent myself from feeling a mother’s tenderness for her.”

“Then you must forbid the girl the house,” said the priest, sternly. “You can easily invent a plausible pretext for that, I am sure. Thank her for her services, and—”

“No, no, I should never have the courage to do that,” said the countess, quickly. “Is it not hard enough for me that my other daughter, whose affection would have been so consoling in this trying hour, is in a foreign land, mourning the loss of the father of whom she was so suddenly bereft? And who knows, perhaps Ernestine, too, is dying as I am. Poor child! She was so weak and frail when she went away! Oh, was there ever a mother as much to be pitied as I am?”

And two burning tears fell from Madame de Beaumesnil’s eyes.

“Calm yourself, my sister,” said the abbé, soothingly; “do not grieve so. Put your trust in Heaven. Our Saviour’s mercy is great. He has sustained you through this solemn ceremony, which was, as I told you, merely a precaution, for, God be praised! your condition, though alarming, is by no means hopeless.”

Madame de Beaumesnil shook her head sadly, as she replied:

“I am growing weaker fast, my father, but now that my last duties are performed I feel much calmer. Ah, if I did not have my children to think of, I could die in peace.”

THE UNHAPPY SECRET.

“I understand you, my sister,” said the priest, soothingly. Then watching Madame de Beaumesnil’s face closely all the while, he continued :

“I understand you, my sister. The future of your child, your legitimate child,—I cannot and must not speak of the other,—her future excites your liveliest apprehensions — and you are right — an orphan — and so young, poor child !”

“Alas ! yes, a mother’s place can never be filled.”

“Then why do you hesitate, my sister ?” said the abbé, slowly and impressively, “why do you hesitate to assure this beloved daughter’s future happiness ? Why have you never permitted me — though I have long desired the favour — to introduce to you that good and devout young man, that model of wisdom and virtue, of whom I have so often spoken. Your mother’s heart would long since have appreciated this paragon of Christian virtues ; and sure, in advance, of your daughter’s obedience to your last wishes, you could have recommended him to her by a few lines, which I myself would have delivered to the poor child. You could easily have advised her to take for her husband M. Célestin de Macreuse. Your daughter would then be sure of a most estimable and devout husband, for —”

“My father,” interrupted Madame de Beaumesnil, without making any effort to conceal the painful feelings that this conversation was awakening. “I have told you that I do not doubt the great worth of this gentleman you have so often mentioned to me, but my daughter Ernestine is not sixteen yet, and I am not willing to insist upon her marrying a man she does not even know, for the dear child has so much affection for me that she would be quite capable of sacrificing herself to please me.”

“We will say no more about it, then, my dear sister,” said the abbé, with a contrite air. “In calling your attention to M. Célestin de Macreuse, I had but one ob-

ject in view. That was to save you from the slightest anxiety concerning your dear Ernestine's future. You speak of sacrifices, my sister, but permit me to say that the great danger is that your poor child will be sacrificed some day to some man who is unworthy of her,—to some irreligious, dissipated spendthrift. You are unwilling to influence your daughter in her choice of a husband, you say. But alas! who will guide her in her choice if she has the misfortune to lose you? Will it be her selfish, worldly relatives, or will your too artless and credulous child blindly yield to the promptings of her heart. Ah, my sister, think of the dangers and the deception to which she will inevitably be exposed! Think of the crowd of suitors which her immense fortune is sure to attract! Ah, believe me, my sister, it would be wiser to save her from these perils in advance by a prudent and sensible choice."

"Forgive me, my father," said Madame de Beaumesnil, greatly agitated, and evidently desirous of putting an end to this painful conversation; "but I am feeling very weak and tired. I appreciate and am truly grateful for the interest you take in my daughter. I shall do my duty faithfully by her so long as I am spared. Your words will not be forgotten, I assure you, my father, and may Heaven give me the strength and the time to act."

Too shrewd and crafty to press the claims of his protégé further, Abbé Ledoux said, benignly:

"May Heaven inspire you, my sister. I doubt not that our gracious Lord will make your duty as a mother clear to you. Courage, my sister, courage. And now farewell until to-morrow."

"The morrow belongs to God."

"I can at least implore him to prolong your days, my sister," answered the priest, bowing low.

He left the room.

The door had scarcely closed behind him before the countess rang for one of her attendants.

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“ Is Mlle. Herminie here ? ” she asked.

“ Yes, madame la comtesse.”

“ Ask her to come in. I wish to see her.”

“ Yes, madame la comtesse,” replied the maid, hastening off to fulfil her employer’s instructions.

A few minutes afterwards, Herminie, pale and sad, though apparently calm, entered Madame de Beaumesnil’s chamber, with her music books in her hand.

“ I was told that madame la comtesse wished to see me,” she said, with marked deference.

“ Yes, mademoiselle. I have — I have a favour to ask of you,” replied Madame de Beaumesnil, who was racking her brain to devise some way of bringing her daughter closer to her.

“ I am entirely at madame’s service,” Herminie answered, promptly but quietly.

“ I have a letter to write, mademoiselle, — only a few lines, but I am not sure that I shall have the strength to write it. There is no one here that I can ask to do it in my stead. Should it be necessary, would you be willing to act as my secretary ? ”

“ With the greatest pleasure, madame,” was the ready response.

“ I thank you for your willingness to oblige me.”

“ Does madame la comtesse wish me to get the necessary writing materials for her ? ”

“ A thousand thanks, mademoiselle,” replied the poor mother, though she longed to accept her daughter’s offer so she might keep her with her as long as possible. “ I will ring for some one. I am loath to give you so much trouble.”

“ It is no trouble to me, madame. I will gladly get the necessary materials if you will tell me where to find them.”

“ Over there, on that table near the piano, mademoiselle. I must also ask you to have the goodness to light a

candle,—the light from the lamp is not enough. But really I am trespassing entirely too much upon your good nature," added Madame de Beaumesnil, as her daughter lighted a candle and brought the necessary writing materials to the bedside.

The countess having taken a sheet of paper and laid it upon a blotting-case placed upon her knees, accepted a pen from the hand of Herminie, who was holding the candle in the other.

Madame de Beaumesnil tried to write a few words, but her extreme weakness, together with her failing sight, compelled her to desist from her efforts; the pen dropped from her trembling fingers, and, sinking back upon her pillows, the countess said to Herminie, with a forced smile:

"I am not as strong as I thought, so I shall be obliged to accept your kind offer, mademoiselle."

"Madame la comtesse has been in bed so long that she should not be surprised to find herself a little weak," responded Herminie, anxious to reassure Madame de Beaumesnil and herself as well.

"You are right, mademoiselle. It was very foolish in me to try to write. I will dictate to you, if you have no objections."

Herminie had not felt at liberty to remove her hat, and the countess, from whom the brim concealed a part of her child's face, said, with some embarrassment:

"If you would take off your hat, mademoiselle, you would find it more convenient to write, I think."

Herminie removed her hat, and the countess, who was fairly devouring the girl with her eyes, had an opportunity to admire at her ease, with true maternal pride, the charming face and golden tresses of her child.

"I am at your service now, madame la comtesse," said Herminie, seating herself at a table.

"Then will you kindly write this." And the countess proceeded to dictate as follows:

THE UNHAPPY SECRET.

“ Madame de Beaumesnil would be greatly obliged to M. le Marquis de Maillefort if he would come to her house as soon as possible, even should that be at a late hour of the night.

“ Madame de Beaumesnil, being very weak, is obliged to have recourse to the hand of another person in order to write to M. de Maillefort, to whom she reiterates the assurance of her very highest regard.”

As Madame de Beaumesnil dictated this note she was assailed by one of those puerile, but no less poignant, fears that only a mother can understand.

Delighted by the refinement of manner and language she noticed in her daughter, and aware that she was a musical artiste of a high order, the countess asked herself, with a mother’s jealous solicitude, if Herminie’s education was all it should be, and if her child’s great musical talent might not have been cultivated at the expense of other and less showy accomplishments.

And strange as it may seem,—so important are the merest trifles to a mother’s pride,—at that moment, and in spite of all her grave anxieties, Madame de Beaumesnil was saying to herself :

“ What if my daughter did not spell well ? What if her handwriting should prove execrable ? ”

This fear was so keen that for a minute or two the countess dared not ask Herminie to show her the letter she had written, but, finally, unable to endure the suspense any longer, she asked :

“ Have you finished, mademoiselle ? ”

“ Yes, madame la comtesse.”

“ Then will you have the goodness to hand me the letter so — so I can see if M. de Maillefort’s name is spelled correctly. I neglected to tell you how it was spelled,” added the countess, unable to invent any better excuse for her curiosity.

Herminie placed the letter in Madame de Beaumesnil’s hand. And how proud and delighted that lady was

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when she saw that the spelling was not only absolutely perfect, but that the chirography was both graceful and distinguished.

"Wonderful! I never saw more beautiful writing!" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, hastily.

Then, fearing her companion would notice her emotion, she added, more calmly:

"Will you kindly address the letter now, mademoiselle, to —

“*M. le Marquis de Maillefort,*
“*No. 45 Rue des Martyrs.*”

Madame de Beaumesnil then summoned a trusty maid who waited upon her exclusively, and as soon as she came in, said to her :

"Madame Dupont, you will take a carriage and deliver this letter yourself to the person to whom it is addressed. In case M. de Maillefort is not at home, you are to wait for him."

"But what if madame la comtesse should need anything during my absence?" said the maid, evidently much surprised at this order.

"Attend to my commission," replied Madame de Beaumesnil. "Mademoiselle here will, I am sure, be kind enough to perform any service I may require."

Herminie bowed her assent.

The countess proceeded to repeat her instructions to her attendant, and while she was thus engaged, Herminie feeling comparatively safe from observation, gazed at Madame de Beaumesnil with a world of love and anxiety in her eyes, saying to herself the while, with touching resignation:

"I dare not gaze at her except by stealth, and yet she is my mother. Ah, may she never suspect that I know the unhappy secret of my birth."

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRIVATE INTERVIEW.

IT was with an expression of almost triumphant satisfaction that Mme. de Beaumesnil watched her maid depart.

The poor mother felt sure now of at least an hour alone with her daughter.

Thanks to this happiness, a faint flush overspread her pallid cheeks, her dim eyes began to sparkle with a feverish light, and the intense prostration gave place to an unnatural excitement, for the countess was making an almost superhuman effort to profit by this opportunity to talk with her daughter alone.

The door had scarcely closed upon the attendant when Madame de Beaumesnil said :

“ Mademoiselle, will you have the goodness to pour into a cup five or six spoonfuls of that cordial there on the mantel ? ”

“ But, madame, you forget that the physician ordered you to take this medicine only in small doses,” protested Herminie, anxiously. “ At least, it seems to me I heard him give those directions yesterday.”

“ Yes, but I am feeling much better now, and this potion will do me a wonderful amount of good, I think — will give me new strength, in fact.”

“ Madame la comtesse is really feeling better ? ” asked Herminie, divided between a desire to believe Madame de Beaumesnil and a fear of seeing her deceived as to the gravity of her situation.

" You can scarcely credit the improvement I speak of, perhaps. The sad rites you witnessed a few minutes ago frightened you, I suppose, and very naturally. But it was only a precaution on my part, for the consciousness of having fulfilled my religious duties, and of being ready to appear before God, gives me a serenity of soul to which the improved condition of which I speak is doubtless due, at least in some measure. I feel sure, too, that the cordial I asked you for just now, but which you refuse to give me," added Madame de Beaumesnil, smiling, " would do me a great deal of good, and enable me to listen once again to one of the songs which have so often assuaged my sufferings."

" As madame insists, I will give her the cordial," said Herminie.

And the young girl, reflecting that a larger or smaller dose of the cordial would probably make very little difference, after all, poured four spoonfuls into a cup and handed it to Madame de Beaumesnil.

The countess, as she took the cup from Herminie, managed to touch her hand, then, rejoiced to have her daughter so near her, sipped the cordial very slowly and then gave such a sigh of weariness as to almost compel Herminie to ask :

" Is madame la comtesse fatigued ? "

" Rather. It seems to me that if I could sit bolt upright for a little while I should be more comfortable, but I am hardly strong enough to do that."

" If madame la comtesse would — would lean upon me," said the young girl, hesitatingly, " it might rest her a little."

" I would accept your offer if I did not feel that I was imposing upon your kindness," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, delighted at the success of her little ruse.

Herminie's heart swelled almost to bursting as she seated herself upon the side of the bed and pillow'd the invalid's head upon her daughter's bosom.

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As they found themselves for the first time in each others' arms, so to speak, the mother and daughter both trembled with emotion. Their position prevented them from seeing each others' faces; but for that Mme. de Beaumesnil, in spite of her vow, might not have been able to guard her secret any longer.

"No, no, there must be no guilty weakness on my part," thought Madame de Beaumesnil. "My poor child shall never know this sad secret, I have sworn it. Is it not a piece of unlooked-for good fortune for me to be the recipient of her affectionate care, which I owe to her kindness of heart rather than to filial instinct, of course?"

"Oh, I would rather die than allow my mother to suspect that I know I am her daughter," thought Herminie, in her turn. "Possibly she is ignorant of the fact herself. Perhaps it was chance, and chance alone, that brought about my present relations with Madame de Beaumesnil; perhaps I am really only a stranger in her eyes."

"I thank you, mademoiselle," said Madame de Beaumesnil, after a while, but without venturing a glance at Herminie. "I feel more comfortable, now."

"Will madame la comtesse allow me to arrange her pillows for her before she lies down again?"

"If you will be so good," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, for would not this little service keep her daughter beside her a few seconds longer?

Mademoiselle and madame la comtesse! If one could but have heard the tone in which the mother and daughter interchanged these cold and ceremonious appellations which had never before seemed so icy in character!

"I have to thank you once again, mademoiselle," said the countess, after she had lain down. "I find myself more and more comfortable, thanks to your kind attentions. The cordial, too, seems to have done me good, and I feel sure that I shall have a very comfortable night."

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Herminie glanced dubiously at her hat and mantle. She feared that she would be dismissed on the maid's return, for it was quite likely that Madame de Beaumesnil would not care to hear any music that evening.

Unwilling to renounce her last hope, the young girl said, timidly :

"Madame la comtesse asked me to bring some selections from 'Oberon' this evening, but perhaps she does not care to listen to them."

"Quite the contrary, mademoiselle," said Madame de Beaumesnil, quickly. "You know how often your singing has mitigated my sufferings, and this evening I am feeling so well that music will prove, not an anodyne, but a genuine pleasure."

Herminie cast a quick glance at Madame de Beaumesnil, and was struck by the change in that lady's usually drawn and pallid countenance. A slight colour tinged her cheeks now, and her expression was calm, even smiling.

On beholding this metamorphosis, the girl's gloomy presentiments vanished. Hope revived in her heart, and she almost believed that her mother had been saved by one of those sudden changes so common in nervous maladies.

So inexpressibly pleased and relieved, Herminie took her music and walked to the piano.

Directly over the instrument hung a portrait of a little girl five or six years of age, playing with a magnificent greyhound. She was not pretty, but the childish face had a remarkably sweet and ingenuous expression. This portrait, painted about ten years before, was that of Ernestine de Beaumesnil, the Comtesse de Beaumesnil's legitimate child.

Herminie had not needed to ask who the original of this portrait was, and more than once she had cast a timid, loving glance at this little sister whom she did not know, and whom she would never know, perhaps.

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On seeing this portrait now, Herminie, still under the influence of her late emotion, felt even more deeply moved than usual, and for a minute or two she could not take her eyes off the picture. Meanwhile, Madame de Beaumesnil was tenderly watching the girl's every movement, and noted her contemplation of Ernestine's portrait with keen delight.

"Poor Herminie!" thought the countess. "She has a mother and a sister, and yet she will never know the sweetness of those words: my sister — my mother."

And furtively wiping away a tear, Madame de Beaumesnil said aloud to Herminie, whose eyes were still riveted upon the portrait:

"That is my daughter. She has a sweet face, has she not?"

Herminie started as if she had been detected in some grievous crime, and blushed deeply as she timidly replied:

"Pardon me, madame; I — I —"

"Oh, look at it, look at it all you please," exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, hastily. "Though she is nearly grown now, and has changed very much in some respects, she still retains that same sweet, ingenuous expression. She is not nearly as handsome as you are," said the poor mother, with secret pride, and well pleased to be able to thus unite her two daughters in the same comparison, "but Ernestine's face, like yours, possesses a wonderful charm."

Then, fearing she had gone too far, Madame de Beaumesnil added, sadly:

"Poor child! Heaven grant she may be better now!"

"Are you really very anxious about her health, madame la comtesse?"

"She has not been at all well for some months past. She grew so rapidly that we were very anxious about her. The physicians advised us to take her to Italy, but my own health would not permit me to accompany her. Fortunately, the latest reports from her are very encour-

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aging. Poor, dear child ! She writes every day a sort of journal for me. You can not imagine anything more touching than her artless confessions. I will let you read some extracts from these letters. You will love Ernestine, then ; you could not help loving her."

"I am sure of that, madame, and I thank you a thousand times for your promise," said Herminie. "As the last news received from your daughter is so reassuring, pray do not worry any more about her. Youth has so many chances in its favour anywhere, and under the beautiful skies of Italy she is sure to recover her health."

A bitter thought fitted through Madame de Beaumesnil's mind.

Remembering the expensive journey, the constant care, and the heavy outlay Ernestine's feeble health had necessitated, the countess asked herself with something closely akin to terror what Herminie would have done — poor, deserted creature that she was ! — if she had found herself in Ernestine's position, and if her life could have been saved only by the assiduous care and expensive travel which the wealthy alone can command.

This thought excited in Madame de Beaumesnil's breast a still keener desire to know how Herminie had overcome the many difficulties of her precarious position, for the countess had known absolutely nothing in regard to the girl's life up to the time when a mere chance had brought the mother and daughter together.

But how could she solicit these revelations without betraying herself ? To what agony she might subject herself by asking her daughter for the story of her life !

This reflection had always prevented Madame de Beaumesnil from questioning Herminie, heretofore, but that evening, either because the countess felt that the

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apparent improvement in her condition was a precursor of the end, or because a feeling of tenderness, increased by the events of the evening, proved too strong for her powers of resistance, Madame de Beaumesnil resolved to question Herminie.

CHAPTER X.

REVELATIONS.

WHILE Madame de Beaumesnil was silently revolving in her mind the surest means of inducing Herminie to tell the story of her past life, the girl stood turning the pages of her music book, waiting for the countess to ask her to begin.

“ You will think me very changeable, I fear, mademoiselle,” said the countess, at last; “ but if it is all the same to you, I would prefer to postpone the music until about ten o’clock. That is usually my worst time, though perhaps I shall escape it to-night. If I do not, I should regret having exhausted a resource which has so often relieved me. Nor is this all; after having admitted that I am whimsical, I fear that you will now accuse me of having entirely too much curiosity.”

“ And why, madame ?”

“ Come and seat yourself here beside me,” said the countess, affectionately, “ and tell me how it is that you who can not be more than seventeen or eighteen years of age — ”

“ Eighteen years and six months, madame la comtesse.”

“ Well, then, how it is that you are such an accomplished musician at your age ?”

“ Madame la comtesse judges me too flatteringly. I have always had a great love for music, and I had very little trouble in learning it.”

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“ But who was your instructor ? Where did you learn music ? ”

“ I was taught in the school I attended, madame la comtesse.”

“ In Paris, then, I suppose ? ”

“ No ; I have attended school in other places besides Paris.”

“ Where ? ”

“ In Beauvais. I lived there until I was ten years old.”

“ And after that ? ”

“ I was placed in a Parisian school.”

“ And how long did you remain there ? ”

“ Until I was sixteen and a half.”

“ And after that ? ”

“ I left school and began to give lessons in singing and on the piano.”

“ And ever since that time you have — ? ”

Madame de Beaumesnil hastily checked herself, then added, with no little embarrassment :

“ I am really ashamed of my inquisitiveness — nothing but the deep interest I take in you could excuse it, mademoiselle.”

“ The questions madame la comtesse deigns to address to me are evidently so kindly meant that I am only too glad to answer them in all sincerity.”

“ Well, then, with whom did you make your home after leaving school ? ”

“ With whom did I make my home, madame ? ”

“ Yes ; I mean with what persons ? ”

“ I had no one to go to, madame.”

“ No one ? ” exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, with truly heroic courage. “ You had no relatives ? No family ? ”

“ I have no relatives, madame la comtesse,” replied Herminie, with a courage equal to that of her mother. “ I have no relatives.”

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"I am sure now that she does not know that I am her daughter," Herminie said to herself. "If she did, she certainly would not have had the courage to ask me such a question."

"Then with whom have you lived since that time?" asked the countess.

"I have lived alone."

"Entirely alone?"

"Yes, madame."

"Forgive me this one more question, for at your age — such a position is so unusual — and so very interesting — have you always had scholars enough to support you?"

"Oh, yes, madame la comtesse," replied poor Herminie, bravely.

"And you live entirely alone, though you are so young?"

"What else could I do, madame? One can not choose one's lot; one can only accept it, and by the aid of industry and courage try to make one's existence, if not brilliant, at least happy."

"Happy!" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, in accents of irrepressible delight; "you are really happy?"

As she uttered these words her countenance, as well as her voice, betrayed such intense joy and relief that Herminie's doubts returned, and she said to herself:

"Perhaps she does know that I am her daughter. If she does not, why should she be so pleased to learn that I am happy. It matters little, however. If she does know that I am her daughter, I must reassure her so as to save her from vain regrets, and perhaps remorse. If I am a stranger to her, it is no less necessary for me to reassure her, else she may think I wish to excite her commiseration, and my pride revolts at the idea of that."

Meanwhile, Madame de Beaumesnil, longing to hear Herminie repeat an assurance so precious to a mother's heart, exclaimed:

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“And you say you are happy—really and truly happy?”

“Yes, madame,” answered Herminie, almost gaily, “very happy.”

Seeing her daughter’s charming face thus radiant with innocent joy and youthful beauty, the countess was obliged to make a violent effort to keep from betraying herself, and it was with a fair imitation of Herminie’s gaiety that she replied :

“Don’t laugh at my question, mademoiselle, but to us, who are unfortunately accustomed to all the luxuries and superfluities of wealth, there are many things that seem incomprehensible. When you left school, however modest your wants may have been, how did you manage to supply them ?”

“Oh, I was rich, then, madame la comtesse,” said Herminie, smiling.

“How was that ?”

“Two years after I was placed at a Parisian school, the remittances which had, up to that time, been received for my schooling ceased. I was then twelve years old, and the principal of the school was very fond of me. ‘My child,’ she said to me one day, ‘your friends have ceased to pay for you, but that makes no difference ; you shall stay on just the same.’”

“Noble woman !”

“She was the best woman that ever lived, madame la comtesse, but, unfortunately, she is dead now,” said Herminie, sadly.

Then, unwilling to leave the countess under a painful impression, she added, smilingly :

“But the kind-hearted woman had not taken my greatest fault into consideration in making these plans. For, as you ask me to be perfectly frank with you, madame, I am forced to admit that I have one great and deplorable fault.”

“And what is it, may I ask ?”

“ Alas ! madame, it is *pride*.”

“ Pride ? ”

“ Yes ; so when our kind-hearted principal offered to keep me out of charity, my pride revolted, and I told her I would accept her offer only upon condition that I was allowed to pay by my work for what she offered me gratuitously.”

“ You said that at the age of twelve. What a little braggart she must have thought you. And how did you propose to pay her, pray ? ”

“ By superintending the practising of the younger music pupils, for I was very far advanced for my age, having always had a passion for music.”

“ And did she accept your proposal ? ”

“ Gladly, madame la comtesse. My determination to be independent seemed to touch her deeply.”

“ I can readily understand that.”

“ Thanks to her, I soon had a large number of pupils, several of them much older than myself,—my pride is continually cropping out, you see, madame. In this way, what was at first child’s play became a vocation, and, later on, a valuable resource. At the age of fourteen, I was the second piano teacher, with a salary of twelve hundred francs, so you can form some estimate of the wealth I must have amassed at the age of sixteen and a half.”

“ Poor child ! So young, and yet so full of indomitable energy and noble pride ! ” exclaimed the countess, unable to restrain her tears.

“ Then why did you leave the school ? ” she continued, after she had conquered her emotion.

“ Our noble-hearted principal died, and another lady — who unfortunately did not resemble my benefactress in the least — took her place. The newcomer, however, proposed that I should remain in the institution upon the same terms. I accepted her offer, but, at the end of two months, my great fault — and my hot

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head — caused me to sever my connection with the school.”

“ And why ?”

“ My new employer was as hard and tyrannical as the other had been kind and affectionate, and one day — ”

Herminie’s beautiful face turned a vivid scarlet at the recollection, and she hesitated a moment.

“ One day,” she continued, at last, “ this lady made a remark to me that cut me to the quick.”

“ What did the wicked creature say to you ?” demanded Madame de Beaumesnil, for Herminie had paused again, unwilling to wound the countess by repeating the insulting and heartless words :

“ You are very proud for a bastard that was reared by charity in this very house.”

“ What did that wicked woman say to you ?” insisted Madame de Beaumesnil.

“ I beg that you will not insist upon my repeating her heartless words,” replied Herminie. “ Though I have not forgotten, I have at least forgiven them. But the very next day I left the house with my little savings. With these I fitted up my modest *ménage*, for since that time I have lived alone, in a home of my own.”

Herminie uttered the words, “ in a home of my own,” with such a proud and satisfied air, that Madame de Beaumesnil, with tears in her eyes, despite the smile upon her lips, pressed the young girl’s hand affectionately, and said :

“ I am sure this home of yours must be charming.”

“ Oh, yes, madame, there is nothing too elegant for me.”

“ Come, tell me all about it. How many rooms are there in your apartment ?”

“ Only one, besides a tiny hall ; but it is on the ground floor, and looks out upon a garden. The room is small, so I could afford a pretty carpet and curtains. I have only one armchair, but that is velvet. I have but little

furniture, it is true, but that little is in very good taste, I think. There is one thing more that I aspire to, however, and that ambition will soon be realised."

"And what is that?"

"It is to have a little maid,—a child thirteen or fourteen years of age, whom I shall rescue from misery and want, and who will be as happy as the day is long with me. I have heard of an orphan girl, about twelve years old, a dear, obedient, affectionate child, they say, so you can judge how pleased I shall be when I am able to take her into my service. It will not be a useless expense, either, madame la comtesse, for then I shall not be obliged to go out alone to give my lessons,—and that is so unpleasant, for, as you must know, madame, a young girl who is obliged to go out alone —"

Herminie's voice faltered, and tears of shame filled her eyes as she thought of the insult she had just received from M. de Ravil, as well as other annoyances of a like nature to which she had often been subjected in spite of her modest and dignified bearing.

"I understand, my child, and I approve your plan," said Madame de Beaumesnil, more and more deeply touched. "But your pupils—who procures them for you? And do you always have as many as you need?"

"Generally, madame la comtesse. In summer, when several of my pupils go to the country, I follow other pursuits. I can embroider very well; sometimes I copy music—I have even composed several pieces. I have maintained friendly relations, too, with several of my former schoolmates, and it was through one of them that I was recommended to the wife of your physician, who was looking for a young person, a good musician, to play and sing for you."

Herminie, who had begun her story seated in an arm-chair near the bedside, now found herself half reclining on the bed, clasped in her mother's arms.

Both had unconsciously yielded to the promptings of

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filial and maternal love, for Madame de Beaumesnil, after placing Herminie near her, had ventured to retain one of her daughter's hands during the narration of this simple yet touching story, and as Herminie recounted the principal incidents of her past life to her mother, she felt Madame de Beaumesnil's hand draw her closer and closer, until she found herself leaning over the bed with her mother's arms around her neck.

Then seized with a sort of maternal frenzy, Madame de Beaumesnil, instead of continuing the conversation and answering her daughter, seized Herminie's lovely face in her two hands, and, without uttering a word, covered it with tears and impassioned kisses, after which the mother and daughter remained for several minutes clasped in a convulsive embrace. It is well-nigh certain that the secret which it had been so difficult to guard, and which had more than once been upon their lips, would have escaped them this time if they had not been suddenly recalled to consciousness by a knock at the door.

Madame de Beaumesnil, terrified at the thought of the act of perjury she had been on the verge of committing, but unable to explain this wild transport of tenderness on her part, exclaimed incoherently, as she gently released Herminie from her embrace :

“Forgive me, forgive me, my child! I am a mother,—my own child is far away—and her absence causes me the deepest regret. My poor brain is so weak—now—and for a moment—I laboured under the delusion—the strange delusion that it was—that it was my absent daughter I was pressing to my heart. Pardon the strange hallucination—you cannot but pity a poor mother who realises that she is dying without being able to embrace her child for the last time.”

“Dying!” exclaimed the girl, raising her tear-stained face and gazing wildly at her mother.

But hearing the knock repeated, Herminie hastily

dried her tears, and, forcing herself to appear calm, said to her mother :

“ This is the second time some one has knocked, madame la comtesse.”

“ Admit the person,” murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, faintly, quite overcome by the painful scene. It proved to be the confidential maid of the countess. She entered, and said :

“ I went to M. le Marquis de Maillefort as madame directed.”

“ Well ?” demanded Madame de Beaumesnil, eagerly.

“ And M. le marquis is waiting below until madame la comtesse is ready to see him.”

“ Heaven be praised !” murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, fervently. “ God is rewarding me for having had the strength to keep my vow !”

Then, turning to the maid, she added :

“ Bring M. de Maillefort here at once.”

Herminie, quite overcome by so many conflicting emotions, and feeling that her presence was no longer desired, took her hat and mantle with the intention of departing at once.

The countess never took her eyes from the young girl’s face. She was gazing at her daughter for the last time, perhaps, for the poor mother felt her life was nearly over now. Nevertheless she had the courage to say to Herminie in an almost unconcerned voice in order to deceive the girl as to her real condition :

“ We will have our selections from ‘ Oberon ’ to-morrow, mademoiselle. You will have the goodness to come early, will you not ?”

“ Yes, madame la comtesse,” replied Herminie.

“ Show mademoiselle out, Madame Dupont, and then bring M. de Maillefort,” the countess said to her maid. But as she watched her daughter move towards the door she could not help saying to her for the last time :

“ Farewell, mademoiselle.”

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“ Farewell, madame la comtesse,” answered Herminie. And it was in these formal words that these two poor, heart-broken creatures gave vent to their grief and despair at this final hour of parting.

Madame Dupont showed Herminie to the street door without taking her past the drawing-room in which M. de Maillefort was waiting. Just as the young girl was leaving, Madame Dupont said, kindly :

“ You have forgotten your umbrella, mademoiselle, and you will need it, for it is a dreadful night. The rain is falling in torrents.”

“ Thank you, madame,” said Herminie, recollecting now that she had left her umbrella just outside the door of the reception-room, and hastening back for it.

It was indeed, raining in torrents, but Herminie, absorbed in grief, did not even notice that the night was dark and stormy as she left the Hôtel de Beaumesnil, and wended her solitary way homeward.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PURSE OF MONEY.

M. DE MAILLEFORT was waiting alone in one of the drawing-rooms when Madame Dupont came to conduct him into Madame de Beaumesnil's presence.

The hunchback's countenance had lost its usual expression of cynical raillery. Profound sadness, mingled with an intense anxiety and surprise, could be easily discerned upon his features.

Standing with one elbow resting on the mantel, and his head supported on his hand, the marquis seemed lost in thought. One might almost have fancied that he was seeking the solution of some difficult enigma ; but now and then he would wake from his reverie and gaze around him with eyes glittering with tears, then hurriedly passing his hand across his forehead, as if to drive away painful thoughts, he began to pace the room with hasty strides.

Only a few minutes had elapsed, however, when Madame Dupont came to say :

" If M. le marquis will be kind enough to follow me, madame la comtesse will see him now."

Stepping in front of the marquis, Madame Dupont opened the door leading into Madame de Beaumesnil's apartment and announced :

" M. le Marquis de Maillefort ! "

The countess had made an invalid's toilet. Her blonde hair, somewhat dishevelled by the passionate embraces bestowed upon her daughter, had been smoothed

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afresh, a dainty cap of Valenciennes lace surmounted the pale face, from which every tinge of colour had now fled. Her eyes, so brilliant with maternal tenderness a few moments before, had lost their lustre, and the hands that burned so feverishly when they pressed Herminie's were fast growing cold.

Noting the appalling change in the features of the countess, whom he had seen but a comparatively short time before radiant with youth and beauty, M. de Maillefort started violently, then paused a moment in spite of himself.

"You find me greatly changed, do you not, M. de Maillefort?" asked Madame de Beaumesnil, with a sad smile.

The hunchback made no reply. His head drooped, and when he raised it again, after a minute or two, he was as pale as death.

Madame de Beaumesnil motioned the marquis to seat himself in an armchair near the bedside, saying as she did so, in a grave but affectionate voice:

"I fear my moments even are numbered, M. de Maillefort, and I shall therefore endeavour to make this interview as brief as possible."

The marquis silently took the seat designated by the countess, who added:

"My note must have surprised you."

"Yes, madame."

"But kind and generous as ever, you hastened to comply with my request."

The marquis bowed, and, in a voice full of emotion, the countess went on:

"M. de Maillefort, you have loved me devotedly," she said.

The hunchback started visibly, and gazed at the countess with mingled dismay and astonishment.

"Do not be surprised that I should have discovered a secret that no one else has even suspected," continued

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the countess, "for love, true love, always betrays itself to the person loved."

"So you knew," stammered the hunchback.

"I knew all," replied the countess, extending her ice-cold hand to M. de Maillefort, who pressed it reverently, while tears which he could no longer repress streamed down his cheeks.

"Yes, I knew all," continued the countess, "your noble, though carefully concealed, devotion, and the suffering so heroically endured."

"You knew all?" repeated M. de Maillefort, hesitatingly; "you knew all, and yet your greeting was always kind and gracious when we chanced to meet. You knew all, and yet I never detected a mocking smile upon your lips or a gleam of disdainful pity in your eye."

"M. de Maillefort," the countess answered, with touching dignity, "it is in the name of the love you have borne me, it is in the name of the affectionate esteem with which your character has always inspired me, that I now, at the hour of death, beg that you will allow me to entrust to your keeping the interests I hold most dear."

"Forgive me, madame, forgive me," said the marquis, with even greater emotion, "for having even for an instant fancied that a heart like yours could scorn or ridicule an unconquerable but carefully concealed love. Speak on, madame, I believe I am worthy of the confidence you show in me."

"M. de Maillefort, this night will be my last."

"Madame!"

"I am not deceiving myself. It is only by a strong effort of will and a powerful stimulant that I have managed to hold death at bay for several hours past. Listen, then, for, as I just told you, my moments are numbered."

The hunchback dried his tears and listened with breathless attention.

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“ You have heard of the frightful accident of which M. de Beaumesnil was the victim. By reason of his death — and mine — my daughter Ernestine will soon be an orphan in a strange land, with no one to care for her but a governess. Nor is this all. Ernestine is an angel of goodness and ingenuousness, but she is exceedingly timid. Tenderly guarded both by her father and myself, she is as ignorant of the world as only a sixteen-year-old girl who has been jealously watched over by her parents, and who naturally prefers quiet and simplicity, can be. On some accounts one might suppose that I need feel no anxiety in regard to her future, for she will be the richest heiress in France, but I cannot overcome my uneasiness when I think of the persons who will probably have charge of my daughter when I am gone, for it is M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë who, as her nearest relatives, will doubtless be selected as her guardians. This being the case, you can easily understand my apprehensions, I think.”

“ It would, indeed, be desirable that your daughter should have more judicious guardians, but Mlle. de Beaumesnil is sixteen. Her minority will not last long; besides, the persons to whom you allude are erratic and ridiculous rather than dangerous.”

“ I know that, still, Ernestine’s hand will be so strongly coveted — I have already had convincing proofs of that” — added Madame de Beaumesnil, remembering her confessor’s persistent efforts in M. de Macreuse’s behalf, “ the poor child will be the victim of such persecution that I shall not feel entirely reassured unless she has a faithful and devoted friend of superior character, willing and capable of guiding her in her choice. Will you be this faithful friend to my child, M. de Maillefort? Consent, I beseech you, and I shall leave the world satisfied that my daughter’s lot in life will be as happy as it will be brilliant.”

.. “ I will endeavour to be such a friend to your daugh-

ter, madame. Everything that I can do for her, I will do."

"Ah, I can breath freely now, I no longer feel any anxiety in regard to Ernestine. I know what such a promise means from you, M. de Maillefort," exclaimed the countess, her face beaming with hope and serenity.

But almost immediately a consciousness of increasing weakness, together with other unfavourable symptoms, convinced Madame de Beaumesnil that her end was fast approaching. Her countenance, which had beamed for a moment with the hope and serenity M. de Maillefort's promise had inspired, became troubled again, and in a hurried, almost entreating voice, she continued :

"But this is not all, M. de Maillefort, I have a still greater favour to ask of you. Aided by your counsels, my daughter Ernestine will be as happy as she is rich. Her future is as bright and as well assured as any person's can be, but it is very different concerning the future of a poor but noble-hearted creature, whom — I — I wish that you —"

Madame de Beaumesnil paused. Say more she dared not — could not.

Though she had resolved to tell M. de Maillefort the secret of Herminie's birth, in the hope of ensuring her child the protection of this generous man, she shrank from the shame of such a confession,— a confession which would also have been a violation of the solemn oath she had taken years before, and faithfully kept.

The marquis, seeing her hesitate, said, gently :

"What is it, madame ? Will you not be kind enough to tell me what other service I can render you ? Do you not know that you can depend upon me as one of the most devoted of your friends ?"

"I know that ! I know that !" gasped Madame de Beaumesnil, "but I dare not — I am afraid —"

The marquis, deeply touched by her distress, en-

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deavoured to make it easier for her to prefer her request by saying :

“ When you checked yourself just now, madame, you were speaking, I think, of the uncertain future of a poor but noble-hearted creature. Who is she ? And in what way can I be of service to her ? ”

Overcome with grief and increasing weakness, Madame de Beaumesnil buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears ; then, after a brief silence, riveting her weeping eyes on the marquis, and endeavouring to appear more calm, she said, brokenly :

“ Yes, you might be of the greatest possible service to a poor girl — worthy in every respect — of your interest, for she, too, is an orphan — a most unfortunate orphan, — for she is both friendless and penniless, but, oh, so brave, and so proud ! In short, she is an angel,” cried the countess, with a vehemence at which M. de Maillefort marvelled greatly. “ Yes,” continued Madame de Beaumesnil, sobbing violently, “ Yes, she is an angel of courage and of virtue, and it is for this angel that I ask the same fatherly interest I asked for my daughter Ernestine. Oh, M. de Maillefort, do not refuse my request, I beseech you ! ”

The excitement and embarrassment Madame de Beaumesnil manifested in speaking of this orphan, together with the almost frenzied appeal in her behalf, excited the Marquis de Maillefort’s profound astonishment.

For a moment he was too amazed to speak ; then, all of a sudden, he started violently, for a terrible suspicion darted through his mind. He recollects some of the scandalous (up to this time he had always styled them infamous) reports, which had been rife in former years, concerning Madame de Beaumesnil, and which he had avenged by challenging M. de Mornand that very day.

Could it be that there had really been a foundation for these rumours ? Was this orphan, in whom Madame de Beaumesnil seemed to take such a profound interest,

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bound to the countess by a secret tie ? Was she, indeed, the child of her shame ?

But almost immediately the marquis, full of confidence in Madame de Beaumesnil's virtue, drove away these odious suspicions, and bitterly reproached himself for having entertained them even for a moment.

The countess, terrified by the hunchback's silence, said to him, in trembling tones :

“ Forgive me, M. de Maillefort. I see that I have presumed too much upon your generous kindness. Not content with having secured your fatherly protection for my daughter, Ernestine, I must needs seek to interest you in an unfortunate stranger. Pardon me, I beseech you.”

The tone in which Madame de Beaumesnil uttered these words was so heart-broken and full of despair that M. de Maillefort's suspicions revived. One of his dearest illusions was being ruthlessly destroyed. Madame de Beaumesnil was no longer the ideal woman he had so long adored.

But taking pity on this unhappy mother, and understanding how terribly she must suffer, M. de Maillefort felt his eyes fill with tears, and it was in an agitated voice that he replied :

“ You need have no fears, madame, I shall keep my promise, and the orphan girl you command to my care will be as dear to me as Mlle. de Beaumesnil. I shall have two daughters instead of one.”

And he pressed the hand of Madame de Beaumesnil affectionately, as if to seal his promise.

“ Now I can die in peace ! ” exclaimed the countess. And before the marquis could prevent it, she had pressed her cold lips upon the hand he had offered her ; and, from this manifestation of ineffable gratitude, M. de Maillefort was convinced that the person in question was indeed Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

All at once, either because so much violent emotion

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had exhausted the invalid's strength, or because her malady — concealed for a time by an apparent improvement in the sufferer's condition — had attained its height, Madame de Beaumesnil made a sudden movement, at the same time uttering a cry of agony.

"Good God, madame, what is it?" cried the marquis, terrified at the sudden alteration in Madame de Beaumesnil's features.

"It is nothing," she answered, heroically, "a slight pain, that is all. But here, take this key,—quick, I beg of you," she added, drawing out a key from under her pillow and handing it to him.

"Open — that — secretary," she gasped.

The marquis obeyed.

"There is a purse in the middle drawer. Do you see it?"

"Yes, here it is."

"Keep it, I beg of you. It contains a sum of money which I have a perfect right to dispose of. It will at least save the young girl I commended to your care from want. Only promise me," continued the poor mother, her voice becoming more and more feeble each moment,— "promise me that you will never mention my name to — to this orphan — nor tell her who it was that asked you to place this money in her hands. But tell her, oh, tell this unfortunate child that she was tenderly loved until the last, and that — that it was absolutely necessary —"

The countess was so weak now that the conclusion of the sentence was inaudible.

"But this purse — to whom am I to give it, madame? Where shall I find this young girl, and what is her name?" exclaimed M. de Maillefort, alarmed by the sudden change in Madame de Beaumesnil's condition, and by her laboured breathing.

But instead of answering M. de Maillefort's question Madame de Beaumesnil sank back on her pillows with

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a despairing moan, and clasped her hands upon her breast.

“ Speak to me, madame,” cried the marquis, bending over the countess in the utmost terror and alarm. “ This young girl, tell me where I can find her, and who she is.”

“ I am dying — dying — ” murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, lifting her eyes heavenward.

Then with a last supreme effort, she faltered :

“ Don’t forget — your promise — my child — the orphan ! ”

In another moment the countess was no more ; and M. de Maillefort, overcome with grief and chagrin, could no longer doubt that this orphan, whose name and place of abode were alike unknown to him, was Madame de Beaumesnil’s illegitimate child.

The funeral rites of Madame de Beaumesnil were conducted with great splendour.

The Baron de la Rochaiguë acted as chief mourner. M. de Maillefort, invited by letter to take part in the ceremonial, joined the funeral cortége.

In an obscure corner of the church, kneeling as if crushed by the weight of her despair, a young girl prayed and sobbed, unheeded by any one.

It was Herminie.

CHAPTER XII.

A VAIN INTERVIEW.

SEVERAL days after Madame de Beaumesnil's funeral, M. de Maillefort, arousing himself from the gloomy lethargy into which the death of the countess had plunged him, resolved to carry out that unfortunate lady's last wishes in regard to the unknown orphan, though he fully realised all the difficulties of the mission intrusted to him.

How should he go to work to find the young girl whom Madame de Beaumesnil had so urgently commended to his care ?

To whom could he apply for information that would give him the necessary clue to her identity ?

Above all, how could he secure this information without compromising Madame de Beaumesnil's good name and the secrecy with which she had wished him to carry out her intentions with regard to this mysterious daughter,—her illegitimate child, as M. de Maillefort could no longer doubt.

The hunchback recollectcd that on the evening of her death the countess had sent a confidential servant to beg him to come to the Hôtel de Beaumesnil without delay.

“ This woman has been in Madame de Beaumesnil's service a long time,” thought the marquis. “ She may be able to give me some information.”

So M. de Maillefort's valet, a trustworthy and devoted man, was sent to bring Madame Dupont to the house of the marquis.

"I know how devotedly you were attached to your mistress, my dear Madame Dupont," the marquis began.

"Ah, monsieur, madame la comtesse was so good and kind!" exclaimed Madame Dupont, bursting into tears. "How could one help being devoted to her in life and in death?"

"It is because I am so sure of this devotion, as well as of your respect for the memory of your deceased mistress, that I requested you to come to my house, my dear Madame Dupont. I wish to speak to you on a very delicate subject."

"I am listening, M. le marquis."

"The proof of confidence which Madame de Beaumesnil gave by sending for me just before her death must convince you that any questions I may put to you are of an almost sacred nature, so I can safely count upon your frankness and discretion."

"You can, indeed, M. le marquis."

"I am sure of it. Now the state of affairs is just this: Madame de Beaumesnil has for a long time, as nearly as I can learn,—at the request of a friend,—taken charge of a young orphan girl who, by the death of her protectress, is now deprived of the means of support. I am ignorant of this young girl's name, as well as of her place of residence, and I am anxious to ascertain both as soon as possible. Can you give me any information on the subject?"

"A young orphan girl?" repeated Madame Dupont, thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"During the ten years I have been in the service of madame la comtesse, I have never known any young girl who came regularly to the house or who seemed to be a protégée of hers."

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“Are you sure?”

“Perfectly sure, M. le marquis.”

“And Madame de Beaumesnil never entrusted you with any commission in connection with the young girl of whom I speak?”

“Never, M. le marquis. Many persons applied to madame for aid, for she was very liberal, but I never noticed that she gave any particular person the preference or interested herself any more in one person than in another, and I feel sure that if madame had wished any confidential mission performed, she would certainly have entrusted it to me.”

“That is exactly what I thought, and it was for that very reason I felt confident of securing some information from you. Come now, try and think if you can not remember some young girl in whom Madame de Beaumesnil has seemed to take a special interest for some time past.”

“I can remember no one, absolutely no one,” answered Madame Dupont after several minutes of profound reflection.

The thought of Herminie did occur to her, but was instantly dismissed, for there had been nothing in Madame de Beaumesnil’s manner towards the young musician that indicated any special interest; besides, she and the countess had met for the first time less than a fortnight before the latter’s death, while the marquis declared that the young girl of whom he was in search had been under Madame de Beaumesnil’s protection for a long time.

“Then I must endeavour to secure my information elsewhere,” said the marquis, with a sigh.

“Wait a moment, M. le marquis,” exclaimed Madame Dupont. “What I am going to tell you may have no connection with the young girl of whom you speak, but it will do no harm to mention it.”

“Let me hear what it is.”

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“The day before her death, madame la comtesse sent for me, and said: ‘Take a cab and carry this letter to a woman who lives in the Batignolles. Do not tell her who sent you, but bring her back with you, and show her up to my room immediately upon her arrival.’”

“And this woman’s name?”

“Was a very peculiar one, M. le marquis, and I have not forgotten it. She is called Madame Barbançon.”

“Was she a frequent visitor at Madame de Beaumesnil’s house?”

“She was never there except that once.”

“And did you bring this woman to Madame de Beaumesnil’s?”

“I did not.”

“How was that?”

“After giving me the order I just spoke of, madame seemed to change her mind, for she said to me: ‘All things considered, Madame Dupont, you had better not take a cab. It would give the affair an air of mystery. Order out the carriage, give this letter to the footman, and tell him to deliver it to the person to whom it is addressed.’”

“And he found the woman?”

“Yes, M. le marquis.”

“And did Madame de Beaumesnil have a conversation with her?”

“The interview lasted at least two hours, M. le marquis.”

“How old was this woman?”

“Fifty years of age at the very least, and a very ordinary person.”

“And after her interview with the countess?”

“She was taken back to her home in madame’s carriage.”

“And you say she has never been at the Hotel de Beaumesnil since?”

“No, M. le marquis.”

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After remaining silent for some time, the hunchback turned to Madame Dupont, and asked :

“ What did you say this woman’s name was ? ”

“ Madame Barbançon.”

The hunchback wrote down the name in his note-book, then asked :

“ And she lives where ? ”

“ In the Batignolles.”

“ The street and number, if you please.”

“ I do not know, M. le marquis. I only remember that the footman told us that the house where she lived was in a very quiet street, and that there was a garden, into which one could look through a small latticed gate.”

The hunchback, after jotting down these items in his note-book, said :

“ I thank you very much for this information, though it may be of little or no assistance to me in my search. If you should at any time recall other facts which you think may be of service, I hope you will notify me at once.”

“ I will not fail to do so, M. le marquis.”

M. de Maillefort, having rewarded Madame Dupont handsomely, called a cab and ordered the coachman to drive him to the Batignolles.

After two hours of persistent inquiry and assiduous search the marquis at last discovered Commander Bernard’s house, where he found only Madame Barbançon at home.

Olivier had left Paris several days before in company with his master mason, and the veteran had just gone out for his daily walk.

The housekeeper on opening the door was so unpleasantly impressed by the visitor’s deformity, that, instead of inviting him in, she remained standing upon the threshold, thus barring M. de Maillefort’s passage.

That gentleman, noting the unfavourable impression

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he was making upon the housekeeper, bowed very politely, and said :

“ Have I the honour of speaking to Madame Barbançon ? ”

“ Yes, monsieur ; and what do you want of Madame Barbançon ? ”

“ I am desirous that you should grant me the honour of a few minutes’ conversation.”

“ And why, monsieur ? ” demanded the housekeeper, eyeing the stranger distrustfully.

“ I wish to confer with you, madame, on a very important matter.”

“ But I do not even know you.”

“ I have the advantage of knowing you, though only by name, it is true.”

“ A fine story that ! I, too, know the Grand Turk by name.”

“ My dear Madame Barbançon, will you permit me to say that we could talk very much more at our ease inside, than out here on the doorstep.”

“ I only care to be at ease with persons I like, monsieur,” retorted the housekeeper, tartly.

“ I can understand your distrust, my dear madame,” replied the marquis, concealing his impatience, “ so I will vouch for myself by a name that is not entirely unknown to you.”

“ What name is that ? ”

“ That of Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil.”

“ Do you come at her request, monsieur ? ” asked the housekeeper, quickly.

“ At her request ? No, madame,” sadly replied the hunchback, shaking his head, “ Madame de Beaumesnil is dead.”

“ Dead ! And when did the poor, dear lady die ? ”

“ Let us step inside and I will then answer your question,” said the marquis, in an authoritative manner that rather awed Madame Barbançon ; besides, she was

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very anxious to hear the particulars of Madame de Beaumesnil's death.

"And you say that Madame de Beaumesnil is dead?" exclaimed the housekeeper, as soon as they had entered the house.

"She died several days ago—the very next day after her interview with you."

"What, monsieur, you know?"

"I know that Madame de Beaumesnil had a long conversation with you, and I am fulfilling her last wishes in asking you to accept these twenty-five napoleons from her."

And the hunchback showed Madame Barbançon a small silk purse filled with shining gold.

The words "twenty-five napoleons" grievously offended the housekeeper's ears. Had the marquis said twenty-five louis the effect would probably have been entirely different.

So instead of taking the proffered gold, Madame Barbançon, feeling all her former doubts revive, answered majestically, as she waved aside the purse with an expression of superb disdain:

"I do not accept napoleons," accenting the detested name strongly; "no, I do not accept napoleons from the first person that happens to come along—without knowing—do you understand, monsieur?"

"Without knowing what, my dear madame?"

"Without knowing who these people are who say napoleons as if it would scorch their mouths if they should utter the word louis. But it is all plain enough now," she added, sardonically. "Tell me who you go with and I will tell you who you are. Now what do you want with me? I have my soup pot to wash."

"As I told you before, madame, I came to bring you a slight token of Madame de Beaumesnil's gratitude for the discretion and reserve you displayed in a certain affair."

“ What affair ? ”

“ You know very well.”

“ I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean.”

“ Come, come, my dear Madame Barbançon, why will you not be perfectly frank with me ? I was one of Madame de Beaumesnil’s most intimate friends, and I know all about that orphan—you know—that orphan.”

“ That orphan ? ”

“ Yes, that young girl, I need say no more. You see I know all about it.”

“ Then if you know all about it, why do you come here to question me ? ”

“ I come in the interest of the young girl—you know who I mean—to ask you to give me her address, as I have a very important communication to make to her.”

“ Really ? ”

“ Really.”

“ Well, well, did anybody ever hear the equal of that ? ” snorted the housekeeper, indignantly.

“ But my dear Madame Barbançon, what is there so very extraordinary in what I am saying to you ? ”

“ This,” yelled the housekeeper, “ this—that you are nothing more or less than a miserable old roué ! ”

“ I ? ”

“ Yes, a miserable scoundrel who is trying to bribe me, and make me blab all I know by promises of gold.”

“ But, my dear madame, I assure you—”

“ But understand me once for all : if that hump of yours was stuffed with napoleons, and you authorised me to help myself to all I wanted, I wouldn’t tell you a word more than I chose to. That is the kind of a woman I am ! ”

“ But, Madame Barbançon, do pray listen to me. You are a worthy and honest woman.”

“ Yes, I flatter myself that I am.”

“ And very justly, I am sure. That being the case, if

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you would only hear me to the end you would answer very differently, I am sure, for — ”

“ I should do nothing of the kind. Oh, I understand, you came here intending to pump me and get all you could out of me, but, thank Heaven, I was smart enough to see through you from the very first, and now I tell you once for all you had better let me alone.”

“ But one word, I beg, my dear friend,” pleaded the marquis, trying to take his irascible companion’s hand.

“ Don’t touch me, you vile libertine,” shrieked the housekeeper, springing back in prudish terror. “ I know you now for the serpent that you are ! First it was ‘ madame,’ and then ‘ my dear madame,’ and now ‘ my dear friend,’ and you’ll wind up with ‘ my treasure,’ I suppose ! ”

“ But Madame Barbançon, I do assure you — ”

“ I have always heard it said that humpbacked people were worse than monkeys,” exclaimed the housekeeper, recoiling still further. “ If you don’t take yourself off, sir, and at once, I’ll call the neighbours; I’ll yell for the police ; I’ll cry fire ! ”

“ You must be crazy, woman,” exclaimed the marquis, exasperated by the complete failure of his efforts so far as Madame Barbançon was concerned. “ What the devil do you mean by all this pretended indignation and prudery ? You are very nearly as ugly as I am, and we are not calculated to tempt each other. I say once more, and for the last time, and you had better weigh my words well, I came here in the hope of being of assistance to a poor and worthy young girl whom you must know. And if you do know her, you are doing her an irreparable wrong — do you understand me ? — by refusing to tell me where she is and to assist me in finding her. Consider well — the future of this young girl is in your hands, and I am sure you are really too kind-hearted to wish to injure a worthy girl who has never harmed you.”

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M. de Maillefort spoke with so much feeling, his tone was so earnest and sincere, that Madame Barbançon began to feel that there was really no just cause for her distrust, after all.

"Well, monsieur, I may have been mistaken in thinking that you were trying to make love to me," she began.

"You certainly were."

"But as for telling you anything I oughtn't to tell you, you won't make me do that, however hard you may try. It is quite possible that you're a respectable man, and that your intentions are good, but I'm an honest woman, too, and I know what I ought and what I ought not to tell; so, though you might cut me in pieces, you wouldn't get a treacherous word out of me. That is the kind of a woman I am!"

"Where the devil can one hope to find a woman of sense?" M. de Maillefort said to himself as he left Madame Barbançon, quite despairing of getting any information out of the worthy housekeeper, and realising only too well the futility of his first efforts to discover Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNEXPECTED CONSOLATION.

Two months had elapsed since the death of Madame de Beaumesnil, and great activity reigned in the house of M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë, who had been appointed guardian of Ernestine de Beaumesnil at a family council convoked shortly after the demise of the countess.

The servants of the household were hurrying to and fro arranging articles of furniture, under the superintendence of the baron, his wife, and his sister, Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë, an old maid about forty-five years of age, whose plain black dress, downcast eyes, white, pinched face, and severely arranged white hair made her look very much like a *religieuse*, though she had never taken monastic vows.

M. de la Rochaiguë, a very tall, thin man, between sixty and seventy years of age, was quite bald. He had a receding forehead and chin, prominent blue eyes, and a long nose. His lips were wreathed in a perpetual smile, which displayed exceedingly white, but unusually long, teeth, that imparted a decidedly sheep-like character to his physiognomy. He had an excellent figure, and by holding himself rigidly erect and buttoning his long black coat straight up to his white cravat, he managed to make himself a living copy of the portrait of Canning, "the perfect type of a gentleman statesman," as the baron often remarked.

M. de la Rochaiguë was not a statesman, however, though he had long aspired to become one. In fact,

this ambition had developed into a sort of mania with him. Believing himself an unknown Canning, and being unable to air his eloquence in the councils of the nation, he took advantage of each and every opportunity to make a speech, and always assumed a parliamentary tone and attitude in discussing the most trivial matter.

One of the most salient characteristics of the baron's oratory was a redundancy of adjectives and adverbs, which seemed to him to treble the effect of his finest thoughts, though if we might venture to adopt the baron's phraseology, we could truly say that nothing could be more insignificant, more commonplace, and more void of meaning than what he styled his thoughts.

Madame de la Rochaiguë, who was now about forty-five, had been extremely pretty, coquettish, and charming. Her figure was still slender and graceful, but the youthfulness and elaborateness of her toilettes seemed ill-suited to one of her mature years.

The baroness was passionately fond of luxury and display. There was nothing that she loved better than to organise and preside at magnificent entertainments, but unfortunately, her fortune, though considerable, did not correspond with her very expensive tastes. Besides, she had no intention of impoverishing herself; so being an extremely shrewd and economical woman, she managed to enjoy the prestige which lavish expenditure imparts to one by frequently acting as the patroness of the many obscure but enormously rich foreigners or provincials — meteors — who, after dazzling Paris a few years, vanish for ever in darkness and oblivion.

Madame de la Rochaiguë in such cases did not allow her protégés the slightest liberty, even in the selection of their guests. She gave them a list of the persons they were to entertain, not even granting them permission to invite such of their friends or compatriots as she did not consider worthy to appear in aristocratic society.

The baroness, holding a high social position herself,

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could easily launch her clients in the best society, but in the meantime she was really the mistress of their house. It was she alone who planned their entertainments, and it was to her that persons applied for a place on the list of guests bidden to these sumptuous and exclusive reunions.

It is needless to say that she considered a box at the opera and other fashionable places of amusement an absolute necessity, and, in this box, the best seat was always reserved for her. It was the same at the races, and in the frequent visits to the seashore and other fashionable watering-places. Her protégés rented a house, and sent down chefs, servants, and horses and carriages, and in these admirably appointed establishments Madame de la Rochaiguë kept open house for her friends.

So insatiable is the longing for pleasure in society, even the most fashionable society, that, instead of revolting at the idea of a woman of noble birth devoting herself to the shameful robbing of these unfortunate people whose foolish vanity was leading them on to ruin, society flattered Madame de la Rochaiguë, the dispenser of all this lavish hospitality, and the lady herself was not a little proud of the advantages she derived from her patronage ; besides being clever, witty, shrewd, and remarkably self-possessed, Madame de la Rochaiguë was one of the seven or eight brilliant women who exerted a real influence over what is known as Parisian society.

The three persons above referred to were engaged in adding the finishing touches to a spacious suite of superbly appointed apartments that occupied the entire first floor of a mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain.

M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë had relinquished these rooms and established themselves on the second floor, a part of which was occupied by Mlle. de la Rochaiguë, while the rest had heretofore served as quarters for the baron's daughter and son-in-law, when

they left their estates, where they resided most of the year, for a two months' sojourn in Paris.

These formerly rather dilapidated and very parsimoniously furnished apartments had been entirely renovated and superbly decorated for Mlle. Ernestine de Beaumesnil, whose health had become sufficiently restored to admit of her return to France, and who was expected to arrive from Italy that very day, accompanied by her governess, and a sort of steward or courier whom M. de la Rochaiguë had despatched to Naples to bring the orphan home.

The extreme care which the baron and his wife and sister were bestowing on the arrangement of the rooms was almost ludicrous, so plainly did it show the intense eagerness and obsequiousness with which Mlle. de Beaumesnil was awaited, though there was something almost depressing in the thought that all this splendour was for a mere child of sixteen, who seemed likely to be almost lost in these immense rooms.

After a final survey of the apartments, M. de la Rochaiguë summoned all the servants, and, seeing a fine opportunity for a speech, uttered the following memorable words with all his wonted majesty of demeanour :

"I here assemble my people together, to say, declare, and signify to them that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, my cousin and ward, is expected to arrive this evening. I desire also to say to them that Madame de la Rochaiguë and myself intend, desire, and wish that our people should obey Mlle. de Beaumesnil's orders even more scrupulously than our own. In other words, I desire to say to our people that anything and everything Mlle. de Beaumesnil may say, order, or command, they are to obey as implicitly, unhesitatingly, and blindly as if the order had been given by Madame de la Rochaiguë or myself. I count upon the zeal, intelligence, and exactitude of my people in this particular, and we shall reward handsomely all who manifest hearty good-will,

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solicitude, and unremitting zeal in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's service."

After this eloquent adjuration the servants were dismissed, and the cooks were ordered to have everything in readiness to serve either a hot or cold repast in case Mlle. de Beaumesnil should desire something to eat on her arrival.

These preparations concluded, Madame de la Rochaiguë suggested to her husband that they go up to their own apartments.

"I was about to make the same proposition to you," responded M. de la Rochaiguë, smiling, and showing his long teeth with the most affable air imaginable.

As the baron and baroness and Mlle. de la Rochaiguë were leaving the apartment, a servant stepped up to M. de la Rochaiguë, and said :

"There is a young woman here who wishes to speak with madame."

"Who is she?"

"She did not give her name. She came to return something belonging to the late Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"Admit her," said the baroness.

Then, turning to her husband and sister-in-law, she said :

"I wonder who it can be?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but we shall soon know."

"Some claim on the estate, probably," remarked the baroness. "It should have been sent to the notary."

Almost at the same instant the servant opened the door, and announced :

"Mademoiselle Herminie."

Though beautiful under any and all circumstances, the lovely face of the "duchess," wan from the profound grief caused by the death of her mother, wore an expression of intense sadness. Her lovely golden hair, which

she usually wore in long curls, was wound smoothly around her head, for, in her bitter sorrow, the poor child for the last two months had entirely forgotten the innocent vanities of youth. Another trivial but highly significant detail,—Herminie's white and beautifully shaped hands were bare; the shabby little gloves so often and carefully mended were no longer wearable, and her increasing poverty would not permit her to purchase others.

Yes, her poverty, for, wounded to the heart by her mother's death, and dangerously ill for six weeks, the young girl had been unable to give the music lessons which were her only means of support, and her little store of savings had been swallowed up in the expenses of her illness, so, while waiting for the pay for the lessons resumed only a few days before, Herminie had been obliged to pawn some silver purchased in an hour of affluence, and on the paltry sum thus obtained she was now living with a parsimony which want alone can teach.

On seeing this pale but beautiful girl, whose clothing indicated extreme poverty, in spite of its scrupulous neatness, the baron and his wife exchanged glances of surprise.

“I am Madame de la Rochaigne, mademoiselle,” said the baroness. “What can I do for you?”

“I came, madame, to rectify a mistake,” replied Herminie, blushing deeply, “and return this five hundred franc note which was sent to me by — by the late Madame de Beaumesnil's notary.”

In spite of her courage, Herminie felt the tears rush to her eyes on uttering her mother's name, but making a violent effort to conquer her emotion, she held out the bank-note enclosed in an envelope, bearing this address:

*For Mlle. Herminie,
Singing Teacher.*







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UNEXPECTED CONSOLATION.

“ Ah, yes, it was you, mademoiselle, who used to play and sing for Madame de Beaumesnil.”

“ Yes, madame.”

“ I recollect now that the family council decided that five hundred francs should be sent to you for your services. It was considered that this amount — ”

“ Would be a suitable, sufficient, and satisfactory remuneration,” added the baron, sententiously.

“ And if it is not, the complaint should be made to the notary, not to us,” added the baroness.

“ I have come, madame,” said Herminie, gently but proudly, “ to return the money. I have been paid.”

No one present realised or could realise the bitter sorrow hidden in these words:

“ I have been paid.”

But Herminie’s dignity and disinterestedness, a disinterestedness which the shabby garments of the young girl rendered the more remarkable, made a deep impression on Madame de la Rochaiguë, and she said :

“ Really, mademoiselle, I can not praise too highly this delicacy and keen sense of honour on your part. The family did not know that you had been paid, but,” added the baroness, hesitatingly, for Herminie’s air of quiet dignity impressed her not a little, — “ but I — I feel that I may, in the name of the family, beg you to keep this five hundred francs — as — as a gift.”

And the baroness held out the bank-note to the young girl, casting another quick glance at her shabby garments as she did so.

Again a blush of wounded pride mounted to Herminie’s brow, but it is impossible to describe the perfect courtesy and proud simplicity with which the girl replied :

“ Will you, madame, kindly reserve this generous gift for the many persons who must appeal to you for charity.”

Then, without another word, Herminie bowed to Madame de la Rochaiguë, and turned towards the door.

“Excuse me, mademoiselle,” cried the baroness, “one word more, just one.”

The young girl, unable to entirely conceal the tears of humiliation repressed with such difficulty until now, turned, and said to Madame de la Rochaiguë, who seemed to have been suddenly struck with a new idea :

“What do you wish, madame ?”

“I must ask you first to pardon an insistence which seems to have wounded your delicacy, and made you think, perhaps, that I wished to humiliate you, but I assure you —”

“I never suppose that any one desires to humiliate me, madame,” replied Herminie, gently and firmly, but without allowing Madame de la Rochaiguë to finish her sentence.

“And you are right, mademoiselle,” responded the baroness, “for it is an entirely different sentiment that you inspire. Now, I have a service, I might even say a favour, to ask of you.”

“Of me ?”

“Do you still give piano lessons, mademoiselle ?”

“Yes, madame.”

“M. de la Rochaiguë,” said the baroness, pointing to her husband, who was smiling according to his custom, “is the guardian of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who is expected to arrive here this evening.”

“Mlle. de Beaumesnil !” exclaimed Herminie, with a violent start ; “she is coming here — to-day ?”

“As madame has just had the honour to say to you, we expect Mlle. de Beaumesnil, my much loved cousin and ward, will arrive this evening,” said the baron. “These apartments are intended for her,” he added, casting a complacent glance around the magnificent room, “apartments worthy in every respect of the richest heiress in France, for whom nothing is too good —”

But the baroness, unceremoniously interrupting her husband, said to Herminie :

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"Mlle. de Beaumesnil is only sixteen, and her education is not yet entirely completed. She will need instruction in several branches, and if you can make it convenient to give Mlle. de Beaumesnil lessons in music we should be delighted to entrust her to you."

Though the possibility of such an offer had gradually dawned upon Herminie's mind as the baroness proceeded, the thought that a most lucky chance was about to bring her in contact with her sister so overcame her that she would doubtless have betrayed herself if the baron, eager to improve this fresh opportunity to pose as an orator, had not slipped his left hand in the breast of his tightly buttoned coat, and, with his right hand oscillating like a pendulum, said :

"Mademoiselle, though we feel it a sacred duty to select our dear ward's instructors with the most scrupulous care, it is also an infinite satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness to us to occasionally meet persons, who, like yourself, are endowed with all the necessary attributes for the noble vocation to which they have dedicated themselves in the sacred interest of education."

This speech, or rather this tirade, which the baron uttered in a single breath, fortunately afforded Herminie time to recover her composure, and it was with comparative calmness that she turned to Madame de la Rochaiguë, and said :

"I am deeply touched, madame, by the confidence you manifest in me. I shall try to prove that I am worthy of it."

"Very well, mademoiselle, as you accept my offer I will notify you as soon as Mlle. de Beaumesnil is ready to begin her lessons, for she will probably need several days in which to recover from the fatigue of her journey."

"I will wait, then, until I hear from you before com-

ing to Mlle. de Beaumesnil," said Herminie. Then she bowed and withdrew.

It was in an ecstasy of delight that the girl returned to her humble home.

Delicacy, a truly laudable pride, and filial love of the purest and most elevated kind would prevent Herminie from ever revealing to her sister the bond of union between them, even as these same sentiments had given her strength to keep silence before Madame de Beaumesnil ; but the prospect of this speedy meeting plunged the young artiste into a transport of delight, and brought her the most unexpected consolation.

Moreover, her natural sagacity, together with a vague distrust of both M. and Madame de la Rochaguë, whom she had just seen for the first time, told Herminie that this child of sixteen summers, this sister whom she loved without even knowing her, should have been entrusted to the care of very different persons ; and if her expectations did not deceive her, the affection she hoped to arouse in her sister's heart might be made to exert a very beneficial influence.

It is almost unnecessary to say that, in spite of her very straitened circumstances, it never once occurred to Herminie to compare the almost fabulous wealth of her sister with her own condition, which was that of a poor artiste exposed to all the trying vicissitudes of sickness and poverty.

Proud and generous natures diffuse around them a radiance which not unfrequently melts even the thick ice of selfishness and egotism, as in the preceding interview, when Herminie's dignity, exquisite grace, and simplicity of manner had awakened so much interest and extorted such respect from M. and Madame de la Rochaguë,—worldly-minded and unsympathising though they were,—that they had entirely of their own accord made the young girl the offer that so rejoiced her heart.

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The baron and his wife and sister, left alone after Herminie's departure, went up to their own apartments to hold a conference on the subject of Ernestine de Beaumesnil's arrival and the tactics that should be pursued.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SOLEMN COMPACT.

THEY had scarcely reached the drawing-room on the floor above before Helena de la Rochaiguë, who had seemed very thoughtful ever since Herminie's arrival, remarked to the baroness :

“ I think, sister, that you did wrong to select that girl for Ernestine's music-teacher.”

“ Wrong ? And why ? ” demanded the baroness.

“ The girl seems to me to be very proud,” replied Helena, placidly. “ Did you notice how haughtily she returned that bank-note, though the shabbiness of her clothing showed conclusively that she was in great need ? ”

“ It was that very thing that influenced me,” answered the baroness. “ There is something so interesting in such a proud refusal on the part of a poor person ; besides, this young girl had such a charming dignity of manner that I was forced, even against my better judgment, to make her the offer you censure, my dear sister.”

“ Pride should never be considered other than reprehensible,” said Helena, sanctimoniously. “ It is the worst of the seven great sins. Pride is the exact opposite of Christian humility, without which there is no salvation,” she added, “ and I fear this girl will exert a most pernicious influence over Ernestine de Beaumesnil.”

Madame de la Rochaiguë smiled faintly as she stole

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a furtive glance at her husband, who gave a slight shrug of the shoulders, which indicated pretty plainly how little respect he felt for Helena's opinions.

Long accustomed to regard this devotee as a nonentity, the baron and his wife never for a moment supposed that this narrow-minded, bigoted old maid, who never lost her temper, no matter how great the provocation might be, and who did not utter a dozen words in the course of a day, could ever have a thought beyond those connected with the performance of her religious duties.

"We will think over your suggestion, my dear sister," said the baroness, suavely. "After all, we have made no binding contract with this young person. Your remarks, however, seem to form a natural introduction to the subject of this conference."

Instantly the baron sprang up, and turned his chair around so he could rest his hands upon the back of it, and also ensure himself the ample space which his parliamentary attitudes and oratorical gestures demanded. Already, slipping his hand in the breast of his coat, and swaying his right arm to and fro, he was preparing to speak, when his wife said, impatiently :

"Pardon me, M. de la Rochaiguë, but you must really do me the favour to let your chair alone and sit down. You can express your opinion without any flights of oratory. It will be much better to talk this matter over in a plain matter-of-fact way without indulging in any perorations. Reserve your oratorical powers for the tribune which you are sure to reach sooner or later, and resign yourself to-day to talking like a man of tact and common sense. If you do not, I shall interrupt you every other minute."

The baron knew by experience how deeply his wife loathed a speech, so he turned his chair around again and subsided into it with a sigh.

"Ernestine will arrive this evening, so we must decide upon the course we are to pursue," began the baroness.

"Yes, that is absolutely necessary," replied the baron, "for everything depends upon our harmonious action. We must have the blindest, most entire, most implicit confidence in each other."

"Otherwise we shall lose all the advantages we ought to derive from this guardianship," added the baroness.

"For of course one does not act as guardian merely for the pleasure of it," interpolated the baron.

"On the contrary, we ought to derive both pleasure and profit from the connection," said the baroness.

"That is precisely what I meant," retorted the baron.

"I do not doubt it," replied the baroness. Then she added: "Let us agree in the first place that, in all matters relating to Ernestine, we will never act without a full understanding with one another."

"That resolution is adopted!" cried the baron.

"And is eminently just," remarked Helena.

"As we long ago broke off all connection with the Comtesse de Beaumesnil,—a woman I never could tolerate,"—continued the baroness, "we know absolutely nothing about Ernestine's character, but fortunately she is barely sixteen, and in a couple of days we shall be able to read her like a book."

"You may trust to my sagacity for that," said the baron, with a truly Machiavelian air.

"I shall trust to your penetration, of course, but just a little to my own as well," responded the baroness. "But whatever kind of a girl Ernestine may be, there is but one course for us to pursue. We must lavish every attention upon her, gratify her slightest wish, try to ascertain her tastes; in short, flatter her, satisfy her every whim, please her in every possible way. We must do all this if we would succeed. As for the means, they will be found when we become acquainted with Ernestine's habits and tastes."

"The sum and substance of the whole matter is this," began the baron, rising majestically from his chair.

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But at a glance from his wife, he reseated himself, and continued, much more modestly :

“ Ernestine must think and see and act only through us. That is the main thing.”

“ The end justifies the means,” added Helena, devoutly.

“ We are perfectly agreed upon the proper course of action,” remarked the baroness. “ Ernestine cannot but feel grateful to us for going up-stairs and giving her possession of the entire lower floor, which it has cost nearly fifty thousand francs to renovate, decorate, and furnish for her use.”

“ And the improvements and furniture will revert to us, of course, as the house is ours,” added the baron; “ and you know it was decided in the family council that the richest heiress in France must be suitably housed.”

“ But a much more important and delicate question remains to be discussed,” continued the baroness, “ the question as to what is to be done in regard to the suitors who are sure to spring up on every side.”

“ Certain to,” said the baron, avoiding his wife’s eye.

Helena said never a word, but listened with all her ears.

“ Ernestine is sixteen, nearly old enough to be married,” continued the baroness, “ so the relation we hold to her will give us a prodigious amount of influence, for people will think—and rightly—that we shall virtually decide her in her choice of a husband. This fact is already apparent, for, since you were appointed guardian to Ernestine, any number of persons of high position and noble birth have made, and are still making, all sorts of advances and friendly overtures to me in order to get into my good graces, as the saying is.”

“ And I, too, have noticed that people I haven’t seen for ages, and with whom I was never on particularly friendly terms, are endeavouring to renew their acquaintance. The other day, at Madame de Mirecourt’s, I had

a crowd around me, I was literally surrounded, beset on every side," said the baron, complacently.

"And even the Marquis de Maillefort, whom I have always hated, is no exception to the rule," added the baroness.

"And you are right," exclaimed the baron. "There is no one in the whole world I hate as I hate that infernal hunchback!"

"I have seen him twice," Helena said, piously, in her turn. "Every vice seems to be written on his face. He looks like Satan himself."

"Well, one day this Satan suddenly dropped down from the clouds, as cool as you please, though he hadn't set foot in my house for five or six years, and he has called several times since."

"If he has taken to flattering you and paying court to you it can hardly be on his own account."

"Evidently not, so I am convinced that M. de Maillefort has some ulterior motive, and I am resolved to discover this motive."

"I'm sorry to learn that he's coming here again," said M. de la Rochaiguë. "He is my greatest antipathy, my *bête noire*."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense," exclaimed the baroness, impatiently; "we have got to put up with the marquis, there's no help for it. Besides, if a man of his position makes such advances to you, how will it be with others? This is an incontestable proof of our influence. Let us endeavour to profit by it in every possible way, and by and by, when the girl is ready to settle down, we shall be stupid indeed if we cannot induce her to make a choice that will be very advantageous to us."

"You state the case admirably, my dear," said the baron, apparently much impressed, while Helena, who was evidently no less deeply interested, drew her chair closer to that of her brother and his wife.

"And now had we better hasten or retard the

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moment when Ernestine makes her choice ?" asked the baroness.

"A very important question," said the baron.

"My advice would be to defer any decision upon this subject for six months," said the baroness.

"That is my opinion, too," exclaimed the baron, as if this statement of his wife's views had given him great inward satisfaction.

"I agree with you perfectly, my brother, and with you, my sister," said Helena, who had listened silently and with downcast eyes to every word of the conversation.

"Very well," said the baroness, evidently well pleased with this harmony of feeling. "And now there can be no doubt that we shall be able to conduct the affair to a successful termination, for we will all take a solemn oath, by all we hold most dear, to accept no suitor for Ernestine's hand, without warning and consulting one another."

"To act alone or secretly would be an act of infamous, shameless, and horrible treachery," exclaimed the baron, as if shocked at the mere idea of such an atrocity.

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured Helena, clasping her hands. "Who could ever think of acting such a treacherous part?"

"It would be an infamous act," said the baroness, in her turn, "and worse,—it would be a fatal blunder. We shall be strong if we act in unison, but weak, if we act independently of one another."

"In union there is strength!" said the baron, sententiously.

"So, unless we mutually agree upon a change of plan, we will defer all action on the subject of Ernestine's marriage for six months, in order that we may have time to strengthen our influence over her."

"This question decided, there is another important matter to be considered," continued the baroness. "Is Ernestine to be allowed to retain her governess or not? This Madame Lafné, as nearly as I can ascertain, is

only a little above the ordinary maid. She has been with Ernestine two years, though, and must, consequently, have some influence over her."

"In that case, we had better oust the governess, or prejudice Ernestine against her," volunteered the baron, with an air of profound wisdom. "That would be the thing to do."

"A very silly thing," retorted the baroness.

"But, my dear —"

"The only sensible thing to do in such a contingency is to win the governess over to our side, and then see that she acts according to our instructions. In that case, this woman's influence, instead of being dangerous, would prove of the greatest possible service to us."

"That is true," said Helena.

"Yes, considered from this point of view, the governess might be very useful, very serviceable, and very advantageous," said the baron, thoughtfully; "but if she should refuse to ally herself with our interests,—if our attempts to conciliate this woman should excite Ernestine's suspicions, what then?"

"We must first see what can be done, and I'll attend to that," said the baroness. "If we find that the woman cannot be won over, then we will adopt M. de la Rochaguë's first suggestion, and get rid of the governess."

The conference was here interrupted by a servant, who came to announce that the courier who preceded Mlle. de Beaumesnil's carriage had just ridden into the courtyard, and said that he was but a half hour in advance of the others.

"Quick — quick — to our toilets," said the baroness, as soon as the servant left the room. Then she added, as if the thought had just occurred to her:

"But, now I think of it, being cousins, we wore mourning six weeks for the countess. It would be a good idea, perhaps, to put it on again. All Ernestine's servants are in black, and by our order her carriages

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will be draped in black. Don't you think that if I should be dressed in colours the first time she sees me, the child would think hard of it?"

"You are right, my dear," said the baron. "Resume your mourning, if only for a fortnight."

"I hate the idea," said the baroness, "for black is frightfully unbecoming to me. But this is one of the many sacrifices a person is obliged to make. Now, as to our compact," added the baroness. "No secret or independent step is to be taken in regard to Ernestine. We will all make a solemn promise to that effect. I, for one, swear it."

"And I," said the baron.

"And I," murmured Helena.

All three then hurried off to dress for the evening.

The baroness had no sooner locked herself in her own room, however, than she seated herself at her desk, and hastily penned the following note:

"**M**Y DEAREST JULIE: — The child arrives this evening. I shall be at your house to-morrow morning at ten o'clock. We haven't a minute to lose. Notify a certain person at once. We must come to a full understanding without delay. Silence and prudence,

"L. DE L. R."

The baroness addressed this note to —

Madame la Vicomtesse de Mirecourt.

Then, calling her maid, and handing her the missive, she said :

"While we are at table you must take this to Madame de Mirecourt. You will take a box with you when you go out, as if you were going on an errand."

Almost at the same moment the baron was affixing his signature to the following note :

"M. de la Rochaiguë begs that M. le Baron de Ravil

PRIDE.

will see him to-morrow at his house between one and two o'clock in the afternoon. The matter is urgent.

"M. de la Rochaguë counts upon seeing M. de Ravil at the time and place named, and assures him of his most distinguished consideration."

The baron addressed this note to —

*M. le Baron de Ravil,
No. 7 Rue Godot-de-Mauroy.*

Then he said to his valet:

"Call some one to post this letter at once."

And last, but not least, Mlle. Helena, after taking the same precautions as the baron and baroness, penned the following note :

"**M**Y DEAR ABBÉ:—Do not fail to call to-morrow morning at ten o'clock.

"May God be with you. The hour has come.

"Pray for me as I pray for you.

"H. DE L. R."

This note Helena addressed to —

*M. l'Abbé Ledoux,
Rue de la Plaushe.*

CHAPTER XV.

A GLORIOUS DREAM.

ON the day following this conference in the Rochaiguë family, three important scenes took place in the homes of as many different persons.

The first occurred in the house of Abbé Ledoux, the priest we saw administering the last sacrament to Madame de Beaumesnil.

The abbé was a small man, with an insinuating smile, a sharp, penetrating eye, ruddy complexion, and gray hair.

He was pacing his bedroom in a restless, agitated manner, glancing every now and then at the clock, and seemed to be waiting for some one.

Suddenly the sound of the door-bell was heard; the door opened, and a servant, who looked very much like a sacristan, announced :

“ M. Célestin de Macreuse.”

This pious founder of the St. Polycarpe mission was a tall, rather stout young man with excellent manners, rather faded light hair, regular features, and fine complexion. In fact, he might easily have passed for a handsome man, had it not been for the expression of treacherous sweetness and extreme self-complacency that characterised his countenance.

When he entered the room M. de Macreuse kissed Abbé Ledoux in a Christianlike manner on both cheeks, and the abbé returned the salute in the same apostolic fashion.

“ You have no idea how impatiently I have been waiting for you, my dear Célestin,” he said.

“There was a meeting at the mission to-day, M. l’abbé, and a very stormy meeting it was. You cannot conceive what a blind spirit of rebellion those miserable creatures display. Ah, how much suffering is needed to make these coarse natures understand how essential to their salvation is the poverty in which they are now living! But no, instead of being content with a chance of salvation, instead of living with their gaze directed heavenward, they persist in keeping their eyes on their earthly surroundings, in comparing their condition with that of more favoured mortals, and in prating of their right to employment and to happiness. To happiness! What heresy! It is truly disheartening!”

The abbé listened to Célestin’s tirade with a half smile, thinking the while of the pleasant surprise he had in store for his visitor.

“And what do you suppose has been going on while you were talking wisdom to those miserable wretches down there, my dear Célestin?” asked the abbé. “I have been talking to Mlle. de la Rochaiguë about you. Another subject of conversation, too, was the arrival of the little Beaumesnil.”

“What!” exclaimed M. de Macreuse, colouring with surprise and delight, “do you mean to say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil —”

“Returned to Paris last evening.”

“And Mlle. de la Rochaiguë?”

“Is still of the same mind in regard to you,—ready to do anything, in fact, to prevent this immense fortune from falling into evil hands. I saw the dear lady this morning; we have decided upon our course of action, and it will be no fault of ours if you do not marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil.”

“Ah, if that glorious dream is ever realised it will be to you that I shall owe this immense, this incalculable fortune!” exclaimed M. de Macreuse, seizing the abbé’s hands and pressing them fervently.

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"It is thus that pious young men who are living examples of all the Christian virtues are rewarded in this day and generation," answered the abbé, jovially.

"And such a fortune! Such a golden future! Is it not enough to dazzle any one?" cried Célestin, with an expression of intense cupidity on his face.

"How ardently the dear boy loves money," said the abbé, with a paternal air, pinching Célestin's plump cheek as he spoke. "Well, we must do our very best to secure it for him, then. Unfortunately, I could not persuade that hard-headed Madame de Beaumesnil to make a will designating you as her daughter's future husband. If she had done that we should not have had the slightest trouble. Armed with this request of a dying mother, Mlle. de la Rochaiguë and I could have appealed to the girl, who would have consented to anything out of respect for her mother's memory. It would have been a fine thing; besides, there could have been no opposition then, you see, but of course that is not to be thought of now."

"And why is it not to be thought of?" asked M. de Macreuse, with some hesitation, but looking the abbé straight in the eye.

That gentleman returned the gaze with the same intentness.

Célestin averted his eyes, but it was with a faint smile that he replied:

"When I said that it might not be absolutely necessary for us to renounce the assistance of such a statement of Madame de Beaumesnil's wishes — "

"In writing?" demanded the abbé, casting down his eyes in his turn, before the bold assent Célestin's look conveyed.

There was a moment's silence, after which the abbé said, as calmly as if no such incident had interrupted the conversation:

"Consequently, we must begin a new campaign.

Circumstances favour us ; besides, we are the first in the field, the baron and his wife having no one in view as yet ; at least, Mlle. de Rochaiguë, who is entirely devoted to us, says so. As for her brother and his wife, they are extremely selfish and avaricious persons, so it is quite possible that, if we seem likely to succeed, they will side with us, that is, if they feel that it will be to their interest to do so. But we must first place ourselves in a position that will enable us to make our own terms."

"And when, and in what way, am I to make Mlle. de Beaumesnil's acquaintance, my dear abbé ?"

"We have not yet decided that very important question. A formal introduction is evidently out of the question, as the baron and his wife would be sure to suspect our intentions. Besides, a slight air of mystery and secrecy would be much more likely to excite Mlle. de Beaumesnil's curiosity and interest. It is necessary, too, if we wish to produce the best possible effect, that this introduction should be managed with an eye to the young girl's character."

Célestin cast a glance of mingled surprise and inquiry at his companion.

"So you had better allow us to attend to all that," continued the abbé, in a tone of affectionate superiority. "We understand human nature thoroughly. From what I have been able to learn, the little Beaumesnil must be exceedingly religious and devout. It is also an excellent thing to know that Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a decided preference for the altar of Mary — a very natural predilection in a young girl."

"Permit me to interrupt you an instant, my dear abbé," said Célestin, hastily.

"What is it, my dear boy ?"

"M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë are not very regular in the performance of their religious duties, but Mlle. Helena never misses a service."

"That is true."

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"It will be only natural, then, that she should take Mlle. de Beaumesnil to the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin, that being the church she always attends."

"Evidently."

"It would be well, then, for her to perform her devotions at the altar of the Virgin, where she will also conduct her young friend to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. I would also suggest that the ladies take their places to the left of the altar."

"To the left of the altar! and why, Célestin?"

"Because I shall be performing my devotions at the same altar."

"Excellent!" cried the abbé, "no better plan could be devised. Mlle. Helena shall call the girl's attention to you, and you will make an admirable impression from the very first. A very clever idea, my dear Célestin, a very clever idea!"

"Don't give me the credit of it, my dear abbé," replied Célestin, with ironical modesty. "Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's."

"And to what Cæsar am I to attribute this admirable idea for a first interview?"

"To the author of these lines, my dear abbé." And in a sardonic tone, M. de Macreuse repeated :

"Ah, if you had but seen him as I first saw him,
You would feel for him the same fondness that I feel.
Each day to church he came with gentle air,
To kneel devoutly right before me,
And attracted the gaze of all assembled there,
By the sincerity and ardour of his prayer.'

"You see everything has been planned for me, even to offering the holy water on leaving the church," added Macreuse. "And yet, people persist in declaring that the writings of this impious playwright are immoral and reprehensible."

"That's pretty good, upon my word!" cried the abbé,

laughing heartily. “ Well, Heaven speed the good cause, whatever may be the weapons used! You have everything to hope for, my dear Célestin. You are clever and persevering, and more likely to make a favourable impression on the orphan than any one I know. I would advise, however, that you be extremely careful about your dress. Let it be rich, but not gaudy, and characterised always by that elegant simplicity which is the perfection of good taste. Let me look at you a minute, Yes,” continued the abbé, after scrutinising the young man closely for a moment, “ you had better give a slight wave to your hair instead of wearing it smooth. It takes something more than fine talk to captivate a young girl’s fancy.”

“ Oh, you need feel no uneasiness, my dear abbé, I understand all those little matters. I know, too, that the greatest victories are often won by trivial means. And success in this instance means the most delightful and blissful future of which man ever dreamed,” exclaimed Célestin, his eyes sparkling joyously.

“ And you will attain this success, for all the resources at our disposal — and they are immense — will be employed, if need be.”

“ Ah, my indebtedness to you will be immeasurable.”

“ And your success will not benefit you alone !”

“ What do you mean by that, my dear abbé ?”

“ I mean that your success will have an enormous, an incalculable influence. Yes, all those fine young gentlemen who pose as freethinkers, all the lukewarm, all the indifferent, who uphold us but weakly, will see what one gains by being with us, for us, and of us. These advantages have also been demonstrated to some extent, I think, by the very enviable position — especially for one of your years and of — of your — obscure birth — ” added the abbé, blushing a little, and Célestin somehow seemed to share this embarrassment.

“ So, my dear Célestin,” the priest continued, “ while

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envious and insolent aristocrats squander their wealth and their health in vile orgies and senseless dissipation, you, my dear child,—come from nobody knows where, aided and pushed forward by nobody knows whom,—will quietly make your way in the world, and soon every one will be petrified with amazement at your marvellous good fortune."

"Ah, my dear abbé, you may rest assured that my gratitude—"

But the abbé again interrupted him by saying, with a peculiar smile :

"Do not persist in talking of your gratitude. No one has a chance to be ungrateful to us. We are not children ; we take our precautions ; besides, our best guarantee is the love and good-will of those who are indebted to us."

And the abbé, again pinching the young man's ear in a paternal way, continued :

"Now let me mention another no less important matter. You know the saying, 'He who hears only one bell hears but one note.' You may rest assured that Mlle. Helena will descant eloquently upon your many virtues to the little Beaumesnil. Your goodness, your piety, the angelic sweetness of your face, the dignified modesty of your demeanour, will be her constant theme. She will do everything she can to make the girl fall madly in love with you ; but it would be an excellent thing if these praises were echoed by somebody else, and particularly if they were repeated by persons of such prominence that the words would exert a great influence upon the mind of the little Beaumesnil."

"That would be a great help, I admit, my dear abbé."

"Let us see, then, my dear Célestin. Among your fashionable friends is there no lady who could be entrusted with this delicate mission ? How about Madame de Francville ?"

"She is too silly."

“Madame de Bonrepos, then ?”

“She is too indiscreet and too garrulous.”

“Madame Lefébure ?”

“She is too much of a plebeian. There is but one lady upon whose friendship and discretion I can rely sufficiently to make such a request,” continued Célestin, after quite a long pause. “That is Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre.”

“And you couldn’t possibly do better, for the duchess has an immense amount of influence in society,” said the abbé, thoughtfully. “I think, too, that you are not mistaken in your assertion, for I have heard her praise you very warmly on several occasions, and have even heard her express great regret that her son Gerald was not more like you.”

On hearing Gerald’s name, M. de Macreuse’s face darkened ominously, and it was in a tone of positive hatred that he exclaimed :

“That man insulted me before everybody not very long ago. I will have my revenge, you may be sure of that.”

“My dear boy, did you never hear the Roman proverb, ‘Vengeance should be eaten cold.’ It is a true one. My advice to you is to remember — and wait. Haven’t you a good deal of influence over his mother already ?”

“Yes,” replied Célestin, “and the longer I think about it, the more convinced I am that it is to Madame de Senneterre that I ought to apply in this matter. I have had convincing proof of the interest she takes in me more than once ; and the confidence I now show in her will please her, I am sure. I will consult with her, too, I think, as to the best means of establishing friendly relations between her and Mlle. de Beaumesnil. That will be a comparatively easy matter, I think.”

“In that case, you had better see the duchess as soon as possible,” replied the abbé.

“It is only half past twelve,” said Célestin, glancing

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at the clock, "and Madame de Senneterre is generally at home to her intimate friends from one to two o'clock. I will go there at once."

"On your way you had better consider well if any inconveniences are likely to result from these overtures on your part. I can see only advantages."

"It is the same with me. Nevertheless, I will think the matter over. As for the rest, that is decided, you know. To-morrow morning at nine o'clock, a little to the left of the altar, in the Chapel of the Virgin, in the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin, remember."

"That is understood," answered the abbé. "I will go and inform Mlle. Helena of our arrangements. She will be at the chapel with Mlle. de Beaumesnil to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. I can vouch for that. Now go at once to Madame de Senneterre's. You have no time to lose."

So, after an affectionate leave-taking, Célestin hastened to the Hôtel de Senneterre.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE REFUSAL.

ON the morning of the same day on which the foregoing conversation between Abbé Ledoux and M. de Macreuse took place, Madame la Duchesse de Senne-terre, having received an important letter, went out at ten o'clock, as usual. On her return, at half past eleven, she immediately asked for her son Gerald; but that young gentleman's valet reported to madame's maid that M. le duc had not slept at home the night before.

About noon there came another and very peremptory message from the duchess, but her son had not yet returned. At last, about half past twelve, Gerald entered his mother's room, and was about to embrace her with affectionate gaiety, when the duchess, pushing him away, said, reproachfully :

“This is the third time I have sent for you, my son.”

“I have but just returned home, and here I am ! What do you wish, my dear mother ?”

“You have but just returned home at this hour ? What scandalous behaviour !”

“What scandalous behaviour ?”

“Listen to me, my son : there are some things I will not discuss ; but do not mistake my aversion to speaking of them for either tolerance or blindness.”

“My dear mother,” said Gerald, firmly, but deferentially, “you have always found me, and you will always find me, the most affectionate and respectful of sons ; and it is hardly necessary for me to add that my name,

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which is also yours, shall be always and everywhere honoured and worthy of honour. But what else can you expect? I am twenty-four, and I live and amuse myself like a man of twenty-four."

"But, Gerald, you know that the life you are leading has troubled me very much for a long time, both on your account and my own. You shun society, though your name and talents entitle you to a distinguished place in its ranks, and you keep very bad company."

"Well, so far as women are concerned, I am forced to say that what you call bad company is the best, in my opinion. Come, come, mother, don't be angry! You know I'm still a soldier, so far as plain speaking is concerned. I consequently admit that I have a slight weakness for pretty girls in the lower walks of life. So far as men are concerned, I have friends of whom any man might be proud; but one of the dearest among them is a former soldier in my regiment. If you knew him, mother, you would have a better opinion of me," added Gerald, smiling, "for you judge a man by his friends, you know."

"Is there anybody in the world but you who chooses his intimate friends from among common soldiers?" exclaimed the duchess, shrugging her shoulders disdainfully.

"I think so, my dear mother, though it isn't everybody who has a chance to select his friends on the battle-field."

"But I am not talking of your relations with men, my son, I am reproaching you for compromising yourself as you do with those common girls."

"But they are so amusing."

"My son!"

"Pardon me, my dear mother," said Gerald, kissing his mother in spite of her strenuous efforts to prevent it. "I was wrong, yes, I was wrong. The truth is, though,—but, oh, dear! what shall I say? I don't want to horrify you again—but really, mother, vestal virgins are not

to my taste, and you surely wouldn't like to see me carrying ruin and desolation into happy households, would you, mother?" he continued, in half tragic tones. "Besides, the truth is,—for virtue's sake, perhaps,—I like girls of the people better. The sanctity of marriage isn't outraged, you see, and then, as I said before, they're infinitely more amusing."

"You will excuse me from expressing any opinion on your choice of mistresses," retorted the duchess, angrily; "but it is certainly my duty to censure in the severest manner the strange frivolity of your conduct. You do not realise how you are injuring yourself."

"In what way?"

"Do you suppose that if the question of a marriage was broached—"

"A marriage?" cried Gerald; "but I've no intention of marrying, not the slightest."

"You will do me the favour to listen to me, I hope."

"I am listening."

"You know Madame de Mirecourt?"

"Yes; but fortunately she is married, so you can't offer me to her. I'm glad of it, for she's the worst plotter and schemer on earth."

"Possibly she is, but she is an intimate friend of Madame de la Rochaiguë, who is also one of my friends."

"How long since, may I ask? Haven't I often heard you say that that woman was the very personification of meanness?"

"That is neither here nor there," said the duchess, hastily interrupting him, "Madame de la Rochaiguë has now for a ward Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the richest heiress in France."

"Who is now in Italy."

"Who is now in Paris."

"She has returned?"

"Yes, last evening; and this morning, at ten o'clock,

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I had a long and very satisfactory interview with Madame de Rochaiguë at Madame de Mirecourt's house. I have been devoting my time and attention to a certain matter for nearly a month, but knowing your habitual levity, I would not say a word about it to you. Fortunately, everything has been kept such a close secret between Madame de la Rochaiguë, Madame de Mirecourt, and myself, that we are very hopeful — ”

“ Hopeful of what ? ”

“ Why, of bringing about a marriage between Mlle. de Beaumesnil and yourself.”

“ A marriage ! ” cried Gerald, bounding out of his chair.

“ Yes, a marriage — with the richest heiress in France,” replied Madame de Senneterre.

Then, without making any effort to conceal her uneasiness, she continued :

“ If it were not for your conduct, we should have every chance in our favour, though suitors and rivals will soon be pouring in on every side. There will be a hard struggle for the prize, and Heaven knows even the truth will be terribly damaging to you. Ah, if with your name, your talents, and your face you were a model of virtue and propriety like that excellent M. de Macreuse, for example — ”

“ But are you really thinking seriously of this marriage, mother ? ” asked Gerald, more and more astonished.

“ Am I thinking of it seriously ? You ask me that ? ”

“ My dear mother, I am infinitely grateful to you for your kind intentions, but I repeat that I have no desire to marry.”

“ What is that you say ? ”

“ I say, my dear mother, that I have no intention of marrying anybody.”

“ *Mon Dieu !* he is mad ! ” cried Madame de Senneterre. “ He refuses the richest heiress in France ! ”

"Listen, mother," said Gerald, gravely, but tenderly ; "I am an honest man, and being such, I confess that I love pleasure above all things, consequently I should make a detestable husband, even for the richest heiress in France."

"A colossal fortune — an unheard-of fortune !" faltered Madame de Senneterre, stupefied by this refusal on the part of her son. "An income of over three million francs ! Think of it !"

"But I love pleasure and my liberty more !"

"What you say is abominable !" cried Madame de Senneterre, almost beside herself. "Why, you are an idiot, and worse than an idiot!"

"But, my dear mother, I love independence, and gay suppers and good times, generally, — in short, the life of a bachelor. I still have six years of such joyous existence before me, and I wouldn't sacrifice them for all the money in the world ; besides," added Gerald, more seriously, "I really couldn't be mean enough to make a poor girl I had married for her money as miserable as she was ridiculous. Besides, mother, you know very well that I absolutely refused to buy a substitute to go and be killed in my stead, so you can not wonder that I refuse to sell myself for any woman's millions."

"But, my son — "

"My dear mother, it is just this. Your M. de Macreuse, — and if you really have any regard for him, don't hold him up to me again as a model, or I shall break all the canes I possess over his back, — your M. de Macreuse, who is so devout, would probably not have the same scruples that I, a mere pagan, have. But such as I am, such I shall remain, and love you even more than ever, my dear mother," added Gerald, kissing the hand of the duchess respectfully.

There are strange coincidences in this life of ours.

Gerald had scarcely uttered M. de Macreuse's name before a servant rapped at the door, and, on being told

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to enter, announced that M. de Macreuse wished to see the duchess in regard to a very important matter.

"Did you tell him that I was at home?" asked Madame de Senneterre.

"Madame la duchesse gave no order to the contrary."

"Very well,—ask M. de Macreuse to wait a moment."

Then turning to her son, she said, no longer with severity, but with deep sadness:

"Your incomprehensible refusal grieves and disappoints me more than I can express, so I beg and implore that you will remain here. I will return almost immediately. Ah, my son, my dear son, you can not imagine the terrible chagrin you are causing me."

"Pray, mother, do not say that," pleaded Gerald, touched by his mother's grief. "You know how much I love you."

"You are always saying that, Gerald. I wish I could believe it."

"Then send that brute of a Macreuse away, and let me try to convince you that my conduct is at least loyal and honest. What, you insist upon going?" he added, seeing his mother moving towards the door.

"M. de Macreuse is waiting for me," replied the duchess.

"Then let me send him word to take himself off. There is no necessity of bothering with him."

But as M. de Senneterre started towards the bell with the evident intention of giving the order, his mother checked him by saying:

"Really, Gerald, another of my great annoyances is the intense aversion—I will not say jealousy—you seem to entertain for a worthy young man whose exemplary life, modesty, and piety ought to be an example to you. Ah, would to Heaven that you had his principles and virtues! If that were the case, you would not prefer low company and a life of dissipation to a brilliant

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marriage which would assure your happiness and mine."

With this parting thrust Madame de Senneterre went to join M. de Macreuse, leaving her son alone, but not without making him promise that he would wait for her return.

CHAPTER XVII.

PRESUMPTION AND INDIGNATION.

WHEN the duchess returned to her son, her cheeks were flushed, and intense indignation was depicted on her visage.

“Who ever would have believed it? Did any one ever hear of such audacity?” she exclaimed, on entering the room.

“What is the matter, mother?”

“M. de Macreuse is a scoundrel,—a vile scoundrel!” cried Madame de Senneterre, in a tempest of wrath.

Gerald could not help bursting into a hearty laugh, despite his mother’s agitation; then, regretting this unseemly hilarity, he said:

“Forgive me, mother, but this revulsion of feeling is so sudden and so very remarkable! But tell me, has this man failed in respect to you?” demanded Gerald, very seriously, this time.

“Such a person as he is never forgets his manners,” answered the duchess, spitefully.

“Then what is the meaning of this anger? You were swearing by your M. de Macreuse a minute ago!”

“Don’t call him my M. de Macreuse, if you please,” cried Madame de Senneterre, interrupting her son, impetuously. “Do you know the object of his visit? He came to ask me to say all I could in his praise,—in his praise, indeed!”

“But to whom, and for what purpose?”

“Did any one ever hear of such audacity!”

"But tell me his object in making this request, mother."

"His object! Why, the man wants to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil!"

"He!"

"Did any one ever hear of such presumption?"

"Macreuse?"

"A mere nobody! A common vagrant!" cried the duchess. "Really, it is hard to imagine who could have had the audacity to introduce a creature like that into our circle."

"But how did he happen to reveal his projects to you?"

"Because I have always treated him with consideration, I suppose; because, like so many other fools I took him up, without knowing why, until the fellow thought he had a right to come and say to me that, by reason of the friendly interest I had always taken in him, and the eulogiums I had lavished upon him, he really felt it his duty to confide to me, under the pledge of secrecy, his intentions with regard to Mlle. de Beaumesnil; not doubting, he had the audacity to remark that I would say a few words in his favour to that young lady, adding that he would trust to—to my friendly interest. I do believe he had the impudence to say—to find an opportunity to do him this favour at the earliest possible moment. Really, effrontery is no name for assurance like his!"

"But really, my dear mother, you must confess that it is your own fault. Haven't I heard you praise and flatter this Macreuse in the most outrageous manner, again and again?"

"Praise him—flatter him!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, naïvely. "Did I suppose then that he would have the impudence to take it into his head to marry the richest heiress in France, or to think of such a thing as competing with my son? Besides, with all his boasted

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shrewdness, the man is nothing more or less than a fool to apply to me for assistance in his schemes ! He will be surprised when he finds out how I will serve his interests. His pretensions are ridiculous, positively ridiculous ! He is an adventurer, a scoundrel ! He hasn't even a name, and looks like a sacristan who has just been to dine with his parish priest. He is a hypocrite, a pedant, and a most unmitigated bore, with all his pretended virtues. Besides, he hasn't the slightest chance, for, from what Madame de la Rochaiguë tells me, Mlle. de Beaumesnil would be delighted to become a duchess. Quite a woman of the world, though so young, she has a full appreciation of all the pleasures and advantages which a large fortune combined with a high social position gives, and it certainly is not a plebeian like M. de Macreuse who can give her this high social position."

" And what reply did you make to his request ? "

" Enraged at his audacity, I was on the point of telling him that his pretensions were as absurd as they were insolent, and of forbidding him to ever set foot in my house again ; but I reflected that I might be able to circumvent him most successfully by pretending that I was willing to assist him, so I promised that I would speak of him, as he deserved — and I certainly shall not fail to do so. Oh, I will urge his claims in an effectual manner, I'll vouch for that."

" Do you know, my dear mother, that it is not at all unlikely that Macreuse will attain his end ? "

" He marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he ? "

" Yes."

" Nonsense ! Are you, too, mad ? "

" Don't deceive yourself, mother. The coterie that sustains him is all-powerful. He has on his side, — I don't mind telling you now you detest him so thoroughly, — he has on his side all the women who have become bigots, because they are old, all the young women who are prudes, because they are ugly, all the

male devotees, because they make capital out of their religion, and all the serious-minded men, because they are so stupid ; so you see the name of his supporters is legion."

"But with my social standing, my opinion will have some weight, I think," retorted the duchess.

"But you have been one of his warmest champions and admirers up to the present time, and no one will be able to explain your sudden change of feeling, or, rather, every one will be able to explain it ; and, instead of injuring Macreuse, the war you wage against him will aid him. The fellow is an unmitigated scoundrel and arrant hypocrite. You have no idea with whom you have to deal, my dear mother."

"Really, you take this very calmly—with truly heroic self-abnegation, I might say," exclaimed the duchess, bitterly.

"No, I assure you, his presumption excites my deepest indignation. A fellow like Macreuse to have such pretensions and perhaps be able to realise them, a man who from my school-days has always inspired me with both loathing and aversion ! And this poor Mlle. de Beaumensil whom I do not even know, but who becomes interesting in my eyes the minute she is in danger of becoming the wife of that rascal,—really I have half a mind to marry her myself, if only to spoil Macreuse's plans and save the poor little thing from that villain's clutches."

"Oh, Gerald, my son," cried the duchess, "your marriage would make me the happiest of mothers!"

"But—my liberty—my precious liberty!"

"But, Gerald, think of it,—with one of the most illustrious names in France, and then to become the richest and greatest landowner in France ! Think of the power this immense fortune will give combined with a position like yours, my dear Gerald."

"Yes, that is so," answered Gerald, reflectively, "but

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think of me, too, condemned to a life of ennui, and silk hose every evening henceforth and for ever. Besides, remember those dear girls who love me so devotedly; for, having the good fortune to be young and poor, I am forced to believe that their love is entirely disinterested."

"But, my dear," insisted the duchess, urged on in spite of herself by her ambition to see her son make this wealthy marriage, "perhaps you exaggerate the requirements of duty too much. Because you are married is no reason —"

"Oh, mother, mother, to think I should ever hear you recommending laxity of morals after marriage!"

"You misunderstand my meaning entirely, my son," replied Madame de Senneterre, considerably embarrassed. "I didn't say anything of the kind. If I insist, it is not only to inspire you with a desire to supplant this abominable man, but also for humanity's sake, so to speak."

"Humanity's sake?"

"Certainly, that poor little Mlle. de Beaumesnil would positively die of grief and despair if she is forced to live with such a monster. It would be a most generous and commendable act to save her from him."

"Really, mother, I expect to hear you say in a minute or two that I shall deserve the Monthyon prize, if I contract this marriage."

"Yes, if the Monthyon prize is to be awarded to the son who makes his mother the happiest of women," replied Madame de Senneterre, looking up at Gerald with eyes full of tears.

Gerald loved his mother so devotedly that the emotion she manifested touched the young duke deeply, and he said, with a smile:

"Ah, what a dangerous thing a mother is! She seems to be quite capable of marrying you to the heiress of millions, even against your will, especially when there is danger that a scoundrel like Macreuse may be

converted into a millionaire. The fact is, the more I think of it the more pleased I am at the idea of circumventing this hypocrite. What a blow it would be to him! But there is one difficulty, my dear mother, and it strikes me that I am a little late in thinking of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I am by no means sure that I should please Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"You will only have to try to succeed in doing it, I am sure, my dear Gerald."

"A true mother's view of the matter."

"I know you better than most people, perhaps."

"You are not capable of giving an opinion on the matter, I see. Your affection blinds you, but I forgive you."

"Leave the matter to me, Gerald. Only consent to be guided by me, and see if I don't conduct the affair to a successful termination."

"Do you know that one would take you for an inveterate match-maker if one didn't know you," said Gerald, gaily. "But all mothers are alike in one respect, when their children's interests are at stake they become positive tigresses and lionesses. Very well, whatever your will may be I resign myself to it blindly."

"My dear, good Gerald," cried the delighted duchess, positively weeping with joy; "you cannot imagine how happy you have made me. That wretched Macreuse will die of spite."

"That is so, mother. I shall give him the jaundice instead of the sword-thrust he would have declined to take."

"Now, Gerald, let us talk the matter over sensibly."

"So be it. I am listening."

"As you have made up your mind, it is of the utmost importance that you should see Mlle. de Beaumesnil as soon as possible."

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“Very well.”

“This first interview, you must understand, is of great importance.”

“Unquestionably.”

“The fact is so apparent that I had a long talk with Mesdames de Mirecourt and de la Rochaiguë upon the subject this morning. From what the latter lady is able to judge of Mlle. de Beaumesnil’s character, this is the plan we think most expedient; but you shall judge for yourself, Gerald.”

“Very well, let me hear it.”

“We recognised from the first the impossibility of representing you as a serious-minded and settled man —”

“And you showed your good sense, for I should have proved you a set of base deceivers only too soon,” retorted Gerald, laughing.

“Of course there is no hope of avoiding the many censorious remarks which the frivolity of your conduct seems to justify, my poor Gerald, so the best thing we can do is to make everything that is said against you redound to your credit as much as possible.”

“Only mothers could show themselves such clever diplomatists as that.”

“Fortunately, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, judging from what Madame de la Rochaiguë says,—she talked with the girl awhile last evening, and the mind of a child of sixteen is not difficult to read,—fortunately, Ernestine de Beaumesnil seems to be very fond of luxury, splendour, and display, so we think it advisable that you should first appear before her in the character of one of the most elegant young men in Paris.”

“If you are clever enough to find such an opportunity, I consent, I am sure.”

“It is to-morrow afternoon, is it not, that you are to take part in that race in the Bois de Boulogne ?”

“Yes, I promised that ninny, De Courville, who has a number of fine horses he is afraid to mount himself,

that I would ride his horse, ‘Young Emperor,’ in the hurdle race.”

“Capital! Madame de la Rochaiguë shall take Mlle. de Beaumesnil to the race. They will call for me, and as soon as we reach the Bois it will seem the most natural thing in the world that you should come up and talk with us before the racing begins. Your jockey costume of orange satin with black velvet trimmings is extremely becoming to you.”

“One word, if you please, my dear mother.”

“Let me finish, please. Mlle. de Beaumesnil will see you among a crowd of fashionable young men, in which you shine preëminent, every one must admit. And, then, I don’t doubt that you will win the race. It is absolutely necessary that you should win it, Gerald.”

“It is the general opinion, mother, that the ‘Young Emperor’ and I will come out ahead, but —”

“You certainly ride superbly,” said the duchess, again interrupting her son; “and when Ernestine sees you excelling your competitors in the midst of frantic applause, there can be very little doubt that, upon one with the tastes and character she seems to have, the impression produced will be excellent; and if, after this first meeting, you make yourself as agreeable as you can be when you choose, that impudent Macreuse will appear odious in her eyes even if he should have the audacity to enter the lists.”

“May I be allowed to say a word now, my dear mother?”

“Certainly.”

“I see no objection to being introduced by you to Mlle. de Beaumesnil at a race in the Bois de Boulogne; but do you really think it advisable that the presentation should take place on a day that I am arrayed in the garb of a jockey?”

“But why not? I am sure the costume is extremely becoming to you.”

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"It seems to me to savour too much of an actor."

"Really, Gerald, you have the most peculiar ideas."

"No, no, my dear mother, it is you who have such ideas, without suspecting it. But, seriously, you can present me to Mlle. de Beaumesnil where you please, when you please, and as you please, either afoot or on horseback,—you are at liberty to choose, you see. But I will not have recourse to the fascinations of a jockey's costume. I don't need them," added Gerald, with a comical affectation of extreme complacency. "I shall dazzle and fascinate Mlle. de Beaumesnil by a host of admirable moral and conjugal qualities."

"Really, Gerald, you are incorrigible. You can not treat even the most important things seriously."

"What does that matter, provided the things are accomplished?"

The conversation between the duchess and her son was interrupted a second time by a valet who announced that the Baron de Ravil wished to see M. le duc on very important business, and that he was now waiting in the apartments of M. le duc.

"Very well," said Gerald, though he was greatly surprised at this visit.

After the valet withdrew, the duchess said to her son:

"What business can you have with M. de Ravil? I can not bear the man. He is received everywhere, though, and I must confess that I set the example as much as any one, without really knowing why I do it."

"The explanation is very simple. His father was a very popular man. He introduced his son into the same social circle in which he himself moved, and, once admitted, Ravil, the younger, continued to be received. I, too, dislike him thoroughly. I have not seen him since the day of that strange duel between the marquis and M. de Mornand, and I have no idea what he can want with me. By the way, I heard an anecdote yesterday that shows his real character, perfectly. A poor fellow

who is not very well off in this world's goods obligingly opened his purse to Ravil, and this is the way Ravil repaid him for his kindness : 'Where the devil did the fool steal that two hundred louis he loaned to me ?' he exclaimed in the presence of a number of acquaintances afterward."

"How shameful !" cried the duchess.

"I will go and see what he has to say," remarked Gerald. "The man always seems to know everything that is going on. Wait for me, though, my dear mother. In a few minutes I may return as enthusiastic in regard to this cynical personage as you were exasperated against Macreuse."

"That is very ungenerous in you, Gerald."

"Well, at least admit that you and I are not very fortunate in our callers, this morning, my dear mother."

And M. de Senneterre hurried off to join the baron.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PURELY BUSINESS TRANSACTION.

GERALD greeted M. de Ravil with a cold politeness which did not disconcert his guest in the least, however.

"To what am I to attribute the honour of your visit?" asked Gerald, dryly, without sitting down himself or requesting his visitor to be seated.

The baron, apparently entirely indifferent to this cool reception, replied :

"M. le duc, I came to call your attention to a very promising business matter."

"I am not in business."

"Would you like to marry, M. le duc?"

"Monsieur," said Gerald, haughtily, "this question—"

"Excuse me, M. le duc, I called here in your interest, and necessarily, also, in my own. Will you consequently have the kindness to listen to me? What do you risk by doing so? I ask only ten minutes."

"I am listening, monsieur," replied Gerald, whose curiosity had been aroused by the baron's question.

"I ask once more, then, M. le duc: 'Would you like to marry?' I must have a reply before continuing the conversation."

"But monsieur, I—"

"Pardon me, I did not make my question explicit enough. Would you like to make a fabulously rich marriage, M. le duc?"

"Has M. de Ravil any particular person in view?"

“ Possibly.”

“ But you are a bachelor and a society man. Why do you not marry the lady yourself ? ”

“ I have no fortune, monsieur ; my name is comparatively insignificant ; my appearance by no means prepossessing. In short, there isn’t the slightest chance of my making such a marriage, so I thought of you, M. le duc.”

“ I am greatly obliged to you for your generosity, monsieur, but before we go any further, permit me to ask you a rather delicate question. I would not like to wound your feelings, you know, but — ”

“ I’m not at all sensitive.”

“ I thought as much. Ah, well, what remuneration do you expect for your generous interest ? ”

“ I ask one and a half per cent. of the dowry,” answered the cynic, boldly.

And perceiving the disgust and contempt which his words had excited, the baron said, coolly :

“ I thought I gave you clearly to understand that it was a purely business transaction.”

“ That is true, monsieur.”

“ Then what is the use of mincing matters ? ”

“ None at all,” replied Gerald, controlling himself ; “ so I will say very plainly that this charge of one and a half per cent. of the dowry seems to me quite reasonable.”

“ Yes, isn’t it ? ”

“ Certainly, but I must know to whom you think of marrying me, and how you will manage to bring the match about.”

“ You are very fond of hunting, I believe, M. le duc.”

“ Yes.”

“ And you are an adept at it, I am told.”

“ Yes.”

“ Well, when your pointer or your setter have made a sure stand, they have done their duty, have they not ? ”

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The rest depends upon the accuracy of your aim and the quickness of your fire."

"If you mean by that, monsieur, that, when you have once told me there is a rich heiress in the market, your one and a half per cent. is earned, I — "

"Pardon me, M. le due, I am too good a business man to come to you with any such proposition as that. In short, I stand ready to place you in a position which is not only admirable in every respect, but entirely inaccessible to any other person. Your own personal attractions and your illustrious name will easily do the rest."

"And this position ?"

"You must know, M. le duc, that I am not green enough to tell you my secret before you have given me your word as a gentleman that — "

"M. de Ravil," said Gerald, interrupting the scoundrel whom he was strongly tempted to kick out of the house, "this jesting has lasted quite long enough."

"What jesting, M. le duc ?"

"You must understand that I cannot consider such a proposition seriously. Wed under your auspices, — that would be a little too ridiculous."

"You refuse, then !"

"I have that honour."

"Reflect, M. le duc. Remember that saying of Talleyrand — "

"You quote Talleyrand very often."

"He is my teacher, M. le duc."

"And you do him honour. But to what saying of the great diplomatist do you refer ?"

"This, M. le duc : 'One should always distrust one's first impulse, because it is usually a good one.' The saying is a wise one. Profit by it."

"Ah, monsieur, you little know how much truth there is in what you say, and how extremely apropos it is, so far as you are concerned."

"Indeed ?"

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“I accepted your counsel in advance, for if I had yielded to the first impulse which your proposition inspired, I—I should have—”

“Should have done what, M. le duc ?”

“You are too shrewd not to suspect what it was, my dear baron, and I am too polite—to tell you—in my own house.”

“Pardon me, M. le duc, but I have no time to waste in guessing riddles. So you refuse my offer ?”

“Yes.”

“One word more, M. le duc. I feel it my duty to warn you that to-night it will be too late,—in case you should change your mind,—for I have somebody else to put in your place. I will even admit that I thought of this other person first, but, upon reflection, I decided that you would have a much better chance of success than the other man. To make the match and get my one and a half per cent. is what I am after, so if you decline my offer, I shall return to my first combination.”

“You are certainly a very cautious man, my dear baron, and it is a relief to know I shall not have the chagrin of seeing you lose, by reason of my refusal—for I still refuse—the honest gains you are endeavouring to secure by such honourable means. But are you not afraid that I may be so indiscreet as to noise your new industry abroad ?”

“I should be only too delighted, M. le duc. Such a revelation would be a splendid advertisement for me, and bring me hosts of clients. *Au revoir*, then, M. le duc. I shall be none the less at your service another time.”

With a low bow to Gerald, the baron left the room as cool and unconcerned as he had entered it, and wended his way towards the Rue de la Madeleine, where his friend, Mornand, lived.

“This dukeling, doubtless, suspected that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is the lady in question, and means to rob

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me of my profits by winning the prize without my assistance," the cynic said to himself as he walked along. "It is contemptible in him, but he hasn't got her yet, and he won't get her without a pretty hard fight, that is certain. But it is a great pity! The fellow is a duke, and handsome and clever, too. I was sure of success with him, and now I've got to fall back on that ass, Mornand. I was wise not to say anything about my intentions in relation to the Duc de Senneterre, to that old sneak, Rochaiguë. There was plenty of time to do that, if this handsome gosling responded to my call, as well as to take back all I had said in Mornand's favour, and give the necessary instructions to that old female rake of a Lafné, the governess. Whatever I want done, she will do, and she can be of incalculable assistance to me — self-interest will ensure her devotion and prudence. Fortunately, too, I have managed to get on the right side of Rochaiguë, so now I have nothing to do but state the case to Mornand, who must be waiting very impatiently to hear the result of my interview with the baron."

Pursuing this train of thought, M. de Ravil had reached the corner of the Rue Champs Élysées, where he had first met Herminie when the latter was on her way to the house of Madame de Beaumesnil.

"It was here I met that young girl on the day of Mornand's duel with the hunchback," Ravil said to himself. "She spent the night at the Hôtel de Beaumesnil, and the next day I ascertained from the servants that she was a singing teacher, and lived on the Rue de Monceau in the Batignolles. I've haunted that locality, but have never been able to catch a glimpse of her. Why the devil that pretty blonde took such a hold on me I can't imagine! If I had my percentage of the little Beaumesnil's dowry I would certainly gratify my fancy for that pretty musician, who carries herself like a duchess, in spite of her shabby attire. I am quite sure

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she wouldn't decline my offer of a neat little establishment, for she must be nearly starving on her music lessons. Now I must set to work to stir up Mornand. He is stupid, but perseveres when you once get him started. Rochaiguë is all right, so our chances are good."

And Ravil entered the abode of his intimate friend.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN M. DE MORNAND'S STUDY.

“ WELL ! ” exclaimed M. de Mornand, as soon as he saw Ravil enter his modest study filled with huge piles of printed reports and all sorts of communications from members of the Chamber of Deputies ; “ well, have you seen M. de Rochaiguë ? ”

“ Yes, I have seen him, and everything looks very promising.”

“ You may rest assured that I shall never forget your kindness in the matter. It is evident that it is quite as much a matter of friendship as of money with you, and I am all the more grateful from the fact that your heart is not supposed to be particularly vulnerable.”

“ It is vulnerable enough to you, and that is all that is necessary in the present instance.”

“ And the governess, have you spoken to her ? ”

“ Not yet.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because several little matters must be settled between us. I'll explain what they are presently ; besides, there is no hurry. Madame Laîné, the governess, will do whatever I wish, and whenever I wish it done.”

“ Whatever did Rochaiguë say ? Is he satisfied with the information he has secured in regard to me. Have my colleagues and political supporters spoken a good word for me ? Do you think — ? ”

“ You give me no chance to answer any of your questions.”

"But you see ever since the possibility of this marriage first occurred to me — and I have good reason to remember the date, for that ridiculous duel with that miserable hunchback will always remind me of it," added M. de Mornand, with a bitter smile — "ever since the possibility first occurred to me, as I said before, this marriage has been a fixed idea with me. Situated as I am, it means more than wealth to me, — power — the highest diplomatic positions — will all be within my reach."

"Have you finished?"

"Yes, yes, I am listening."

"That is fortunate. Very well, all the information M. de la Rochaiguë has received corroborates what I had already told him. He is firmly convinced that you will attain the position of minister or ambassador sooner or later, but that the time would be greatly hastened by your marriage with Mlle. de Beaumesnil, for men who are immensely rich are preferred for such positions, their wealth being considered a guarantee against all sorts of villainies. The good man is also certain that, if he brings about your marriage with his ward, you will as soon as you rise to power have him made a peer of France, for if persons who are hung could be restored to life, this man would willingly be hung to secure a seat in the Luxembourg. It is an infirmity, a positive mania with him, and you may rest assured that I have made the most of it."

"If he brings about the marriage, his elevation to the peerage is assured. He has been president of one of the commissions for years, and I will nominate him at once."

"He hasn't the slightest doubt of it, and, being an old-fashioned sort of a man, he relies upon your promise, and is willing to do anything in his power to further your interests with his ward at once."

"Bravo! and Mlle. de Beaumesnil, what does he say about her? Being so young and so entirely alone in the

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world, she isn't likely to offer much opposition, so I should think he would feel pretty confident of success."

"He never saw her until last evening, you recollect, but, thanks to a few judicious questions, he fancies he has been able to discover that this young woman is strongly inclined to be ambitious, and that her head would be quite turned by the prospect of marrying a future minister or ambassador, so she could have a crowd of other women under her feet."

"That is truly providential!" cried M. de Mornand, almost beside himself with joy. "And when can I see her?"

"I have an idea about that, but I concluded to say nothing to Rochaiguë on the subject until after I had spoken to you."

"Well, well, let us hear the idea!" said M. de Mornand, rubbing his hands, jubilantly.

"In the first place, you must understand that you are not handsome, that you are much too fat, that you have entirely too large an abdomen, and anything but a distinguished air. Pardon my sincerity, it is a friend who speaks."

"That is all right!" responded Mornand, trying hard to conceal the annoyance which his friend's plain speaking caused. "Between friends one can say and hear anything."

"That is an excellent maxim. I will therefore add that you are neither attractive, clever, nor good-tempered, but fortunately you have, or seem to have, a very considerable amount of political tact. You have made a careful study of the best means of corrupting consciences; you were born a corrupter as one is born a singer. Moreover, you are endowed with an eloquence of the continuous flow sort, capable of extinguishing and bewildering the best orators — on the other side. In a drawing-room you are heavy, clumsy, and awkward, like all big men; but in the tribune, with the railing

concealing your abdomen, and your chest swelling out majestically under your embroidered coat, you are quite imposing, and can even be said to have some pretensions to good looks."

"Of what earthly use is all this?" retorted Mornand, impatiently; "you know very well that we politicians, we men of mark, care nothing in the world about being considered handsome."

"Oh, that is all nonsense! Don't interrupt me. I was about to say that so much depends upon a first impression that it is by all means advisable that you should appear before Mlle. de Beaumesnil in your most attractive guise, so you may fascinate and magnetise her, so to speak. Do you understand?"

"That is an excellent idea, but how is it to be managed?"

"You are to make a speech three days hence in the Chamber, are you not?"

"Yes, upon the cod fisheries,—a speech full of dry statistics."

"Ah, well, you must be flowery, poetical, pathetic, pastoral, anything but statistical, and this is an easy matter if you will only confine yourself to one side of the question. You can talk of the fishermen and their interesting families, the surf that breaks in thunder upon the beach, the pale moonlight on the dunes, our gallant navy, and all that kind of stuff."

"But I have considered the question from a purely financial point of view."

"Then tear up that speech and write another, for you must devote all the powers of your eloquence to dazzling the little Beaumesnil."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Listen to me, innocent! Rochaiguë shall be notified, and day after to-morrow the young lady will hear everybody around her saying: 'On Thursday the eloquent M. Mornand, the future minister, is to speak in

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the House of Peers. All Paris will be there. They are issuing tickets of admission, for when M. de Mornand speaks it is an event!'"

"I understand. You are certainly nothing more or less than a genius, Ravil!" exclaimed M. de Mornand."

"M. de la Rochaiguë will naturally inquire if Mlle. de Beaumesnil would not like to attend the session, and we will arrange it so that Rochaiguë will amuse the girl with things outside until the time comes for you to ascend the tribune and unloose the fountains of your eloquence. I will then run out and warn the guardian, who will come in with his ward to witness your triumph."

"Admirably planned!"

"And if you can organise a claque from among your colleagues to interlard your speech with exclamations of 'Good! Bravo! Admirable!' our success is assured."

"The plan is admirable, as I said before. There is but one thing that worries me."

"And what is that?"

"Why, as soon as my speech is ended that fool Montdidier will begin to contradict all I said. He isn't much of a politician, and he is not at all practical, but he's as witty and sarcastic as the devil, and doesn't hesitate to say aloud what other people scarcely dare to think in their most secret hearts. If he should begin that before Mlle. de Beaumesnil —"

"Oh, you need have no fears on that score. As soon as you have finished your speech, and while you are receiving the congratulations of your colleagues, we will exclaim: 'A magnificent effort, truly! He is a Mirabeau, a Fox, a Sheridan, a Canning! It is not worth while to remain any longer. There will be nothing worth listening to after that!' So we will hurry out with the girl, after which Montdidier can ascend the tribune and tear you to pieces and ridicule you as much as he likes. But there is another means which I have not mentioned before,—an effectual means which I

have reserved until the last, but which will not only win you the prize, but make it possible for you to retire from political life if you like, and also to tell Rochaiguë in so many words that you cannot make him a peer of France, for, thanks to a brilliant idea that has occurred to me, the baron will not only do everything in his power to further your marriage, but you will also have Madame de la Rochaiguë and her sister-in-law on your side, though the most we can hope for now is that they will remain neutral."

"Then why do you not employ this means, and at once?"

"I have hazarded a few words, thrown out a few hints, but I have ventured nothing decisive."

"And why not?"

"You see I am not positive that—that you will like it. You might have scruples—and yet the most honest and highly respected men, even kings themselves—"

"Kings themselves? May I be hanged if I have the slightest idea what you are driving at."

"But men are sometimes so absurdly sensitive on the subject."

"Sensitive?"

"Still, one is not responsible for it. Can one fight against nature?"

"Against nature? Really, Ravid, you must be losing your wits. What do you mean by all this?"

"You are fortunate, too, inasmuch as appearances are in your favour. You are stout, you have rather a shrill voice, and scarcely any beard—"

"And what of that?"

"You don't understand me?"

"No."

"And he calls himself a politician?"

"What the devil do you mean by prating about my shrill voice, my sparse beard, and my political astuteness?"

"Mornand, you make me doubt your sagacity. Think,

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what did you say to me only day before yesterday concerning the marriage of the young Queen of Spain."

"Day before yesterday?"

"Yes, that state secret, you know."

"Hush, hush!"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid, — I shall be as silent as the grave. Do you recollect now?"

"Yes, I told you that if we could only marry a French prince to the sister of the Queen of Spain, it would be one of the most brilliant of diplomatic triumphs to give the aforesaid queen, for a husband, a prince who offered sufficient guarantees — through his antecedents — that the queen would never have any children. The throne would then pass eventually into the possession of her sister's children, that is to say, into the possession of French princes. A magnificent combination," added the future minister, enthusiastically. "It would be a continuation of the policy of the Great Monarch!"

"Well, the illustration is apt. Profit by it," retorted Ravil, shrugging his shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"Answer me this: Who are Mlle. de Beaumesnil's only remaining relatives?"

"M. de la Rochaiguë, his sister, and, after them, M. de la Rochaiguë's daughter, who is married and resides in the provinces."

"Exactly; so if Mlle. de Beaumesnil should die without issue —?"

"It is the Rochaiguë family that would inherit the fortune. That is as plain as daylight. But what the devil are you driving at?"

"Wait; now suppose that the Rochaiguë family can persuade Mlle. de Beaumesnil to marry a man who can furnish those same guarantees, — those same reassuring antecedents you spoke of as desirable in the Queen of Spain's husband? Would not the Rochaiguës find it greatly to their interest to bring about a marriage that

would ensure them the possession of their young relative's wealth at some future day?"

"I understand, Ravil," said M. de Mornand, thoughtfully, and as if deeply impressed by the grandeur of the scheme.

"Tell me, then, are you willing that I should pose you before the eyes of the Rochaiguës as a man (except for royal lineage) perfectly adapted to be the husband of a Queen of Spain who has a French prince for a brother-in-law? It will ensure you the support of the baron's wife and sister, remember."

After a prolonged silence, the Comte de Mornand said, with a both diplomatic and majestic air:

"De Ravil,—I give you *carte blanche*."

CHAPTER XX.

ATTENTIONS TO THE HEIRESS.

NEAR the close of the day in which Ernestine de Beaumesnil had unconsciously been the object of so much avaricious envy, and of so many more or less perfidious machinations, the young girl was alone in one of her sumptuous apartments, awaiting the dinner hour.

The richest heiress in France was far from being beautiful or even pretty. Her high forehead, prominent cheekbones, and rather long chin imparted considerable irregularity to her features, but this was soon forgotten in the charm of the young girl's face and expression; for the forehead, fair as alabaster, and surrounded with a wealth of rich chestnut hair, surmounted blue eyes of infinite sweetness, while rich scarlet lips, pearl white teeth, and a smile that was both ingenuous and melancholy seemed to implore forgiveness for the imperfections of the face.

Ernestine de Beaumesnil, who was now only sixteen, had grown very rapidly, so, although her tall figure was perfectly straight and symmetrical, the young girl, who had but just regained her health, still held herself slightly bent, an attitude which made the graceful lines of her remarkably beautiful throat all the more noticeable.

In short, antiquated and common as the comparison is, the expression, a lily bending upon its stem, described Ernestine de Beaumesnil's appearance exactly.

Poor orphan, crushed by the sorrow which her mother's death had caused her!

Poor child, overwhelmed by the, to her, crushing weight of her colossal wealth!

Strange contrast, indeed! It was pity, an even tender pity which the face and eyes and attitude of this heiress of almost royal wealth seemed to invoke!

The plain black dress which Ernestine wore enhanced the remarkable brilliancy of her complexion; but as she sat there with her hands folded upon her knees, and her head bowed upon her breast, the young orphan looked very sad and thoughtful.

It was half past five when the girl's governess stole softly into the room and said:

"Will mademoiselle see Mlle. de la Rochaiguë?"

"Certainly, my good Laîné," replied the girl, startled out of her reverie. "Why doesn't Mlle. de la Rochaiguë come in?"

The governess went out and returned almost immediately, followed by Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë, who made two profound and very ceremonious bows, which the poor child instantly returned, surprised and pained to see a woman of Mlle. Helena's age approach her with such obsequiousness.

"I thank Mlle. de Beaumesnil for having kindly granted me a moment's conversation," said Mlle. Helena, in a formal but extremely deferential tone, making another low bow, which Ernestine returned as before, after which she said, with evident embarrassment:

"I, too, have a favour to ask of you, Mlle. Helena."

"Of me? How glad I am!" exclaimed M. Macreuse's protectress, quickly.

"I beg you will have the goodness to call me Ernestine instead of Mlle. de Beaumesnil. If you knew how it overawes me, mademoiselle."

"I feared I should displease you, mademoiselle, by being more familiar."

"Once more I beseech you to say 'Ernestine' and not mademoiselle. Are we not relatives? And after a little,

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if you find I am deserving of your love, you will say
‘My dear Ernestine,’ will you not?”

“Ah, my affection was won the moment I saw you, my dear Ernestine,” replied Helena, with effusion. “I could see that all the Christian graces, so adorable in one of your years, flourished in your heart. I will not speak of your beauty, though it is so charmingly spirituelle in its type, for you look like one of Raphael’s madonnas. Beauty,” continued the devotee, casting down her eyes, “beauty is a fleeting gift and valueless in the eyes of the Saviour, while the noble qualities with which you are endowed will ensure your eternal salvation.”

Overwhelmed by this avalanche of extravagant praise, the orphan did not know what to say in reply, and could only stammer a feeble protest :

“I do not deserve such praise, mademoiselle,” she said, “and — and —”

Then, well pleased to discover a means of escaping this flattery which made a singularly unpleasant impression upon her in spite of her inexperience, she added :

“But you said you wished to ask me something, did you not, mademoiselle ?”

“Yes,” responded Helena, “I came to ask your wishes in regard to service to-morrow.”

“What service, mademoiselle ?”

“Why, the holy office we attend every day.”

Then, seeing that Ernestine evinced some surprise, Mlle. Helena added, sanctimoniously :

“We go every day to pray an hour for the souls of your father and mother.”

Until then the young girl had never had any fixed hour to pray for her father and mother. The orphan prayed nearly all day ; that is to say, almost every minute she was thinking with pious respect and ineffable tenderness of the parents whose loss she so deeply

deplored. Now, scarcely daring to decline mademoiselle's invitation, Ernestine sadly replied :

"I thank you for the kind thought, mademoiselle. I will accompany you, of course."

"The nine o'clock mass would be most suitable, I think," said the devotee, "and that is said in the Chapel of the Virgin, for whom you have a special preference, I think you remarked last evening, Ernestine."

"Yes, mademoiselle, every Sunday in Italy I attended mass in the Chapel of the Madonna. She, too, was a mother, so it seemed most fitting that I should address my prayers for my mother to her."

"They will certainly prove efficacious, Ernestine, and as you have commenced your devotions under the invocation of the mother of our blessed Saviour, it would be well to continue them under the same protection, so we will perform our devotions in the Chapel of the Virgin every morning at nine o'clock."

"I will be ready, mademoiselle."

"Then will you authorise me to give the necessary orders so your carriage and servants will be ready at that hour?"

"My carriage,—my servants?"

"Certainly," said the devotee, with emphasis. "Your carriage, with your own coat of arms emblazoned upon it, and draped in mourning. One of the footmen will follow us into the church, carrying a black velvet bag containing our prayer-books. You know, of course, that is the custom followed by all people of fashion and position."

"Forgive me, mademoiselle, but I really do not see the use of so much pomp. I go to church only to pray, so can we not go afoot? The weather is so delightful at this season of the year."

"What an admirable example of modesty in the midst of opulence, and simplicity in the midst of grandeur!" cried the devotee. "Ah, Ernestine, you have indeed been blessed by the Saviour. Not a single virtue is

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lacking. You possess the rarest of all, saintly, divine humility,—you who are, nevertheless, the richest heiress in France."

Ernestine gazed at Mlle. Helena with increasing astonishment.

The artless girl did not feel that she was expressing any remarkably laudable sentiments in saying that she preferred to walk to church on a delightful summer morning; so her surprise increased on hearing the devotee continue to laud her to the skies in almost ecstatic tones.

"The grace of Heaven has indeed touched your heart, my dear Ernestine," she exclaimed. "Yes, yes, everything indicates beyond a doubt that the Saviour has blessed you by inspiring you with the most profoundly religious sentiments, by giving you a taste for an exemplary life, spent in the exercise of a piety which does not forbid those harmless diversions which may be found in society. May God protect and watch over you, my dear Ernestine, and soon, perhaps, he will give you a still more unmistakable sign of his all-powerful protection."

The loquacity of the usually silent and reserved devotee was interrupted by the appearance of Madame de la Rochaiguë, who, less discreet than her sister-in-law, entered unannounced.

The baroness, greatly surprised to find Ernestine tête-à-tête with Helena, eyed the latter rather suspiciously, but the devotee assumed such a vacant and sanctimonious expression that the lady's suspicions were instantly dispelled.

The orphan rose and advanced to meet Madame de la Rochaiguë who, bustling in, bright and sparkling and smiling, said to the girl in the tenderest manner, seizing both her hands:

"My dearest child, I have come—if you will permit me—to keep you company until the dinner hour, for

I am really jealous of my dear sister-in-law's good fortune."

"How very kind you all are to me, madame!" replied Ernestine, grateful for the kind attentions of the baroness.

Helena rose to go, and, with the intention of anticipating any possible question Madame de la Rochaiguë's curiosity might prompt, said to the young girl:

"To-morrow morning at nine o'clock, that is understood, is it not?"

Then, after an affectionate nod of the head to the baroness, Helena departed, escorted to the door by Mlle. de Beaumesnil.

As she was returning to Madame de la Rochaiguë, that lady drew back a few steps in proportion as Ernestine approached, and said to her, in tones of tender reproach:

"Ah, my dear, sweet child, you are incorrigible!"

"And why, madame, do you say that?"

"I am terribly, pitilessly, brutally plain-spoken as I have told you. It is one of my greatest faults, so I shall scold you, scold you every day of your life, if you don't hold yourself straighter."

"It is true, madame, though I certainly try my best not to bend over so."

"But I shall not allow it, my darling child. I shall show you no mercy. What is the use of having such a lovely figure if you do not show it off any better? What is the use of having such a charming face, with such delicate features, and such an air of distinction, if you keep your head always bowed?"

"But, madame!" exclaimed the orphan, no less embarrassed by these worldly eulogiums than by those which the devotee had lavished upon her.

"Nor is this all," continued Madame de la Rochaiguë, with affectionate gaiety. "I have a good scolding in store for that excellent Madame Laîné. You have

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beautiful hair, and you would look a thousand times better if you wore it in curls. The carriage of your head is naturally so graceful and distinguished,—when you hold yourself erect, I mean of course,—that long curls would be wonderfully becoming to you."

"I have always worn my hair in this way, madame, and have never thought of changing my style of coiffure, it being, I confess, a matter of very little consequence to me."

"And that is very wrong in you, my dearest, for I want you to be attractive, very attractive. I am so proud of my charming ward that I want her to outshine everybody, even our greatest beauties."

"I could never hope to do that, madame," replied Ernestine, with a gentle smile.

"But you must and shall, mademoiselle," laughingly replied the baroness. "I want you to understand, once for all, that my ambition for you knows no bounds. In short, I mean that you shall be considered the prettiest and most charming of young girls, as you will by and by be known as the most elegant of women. It is true I saw you first only yesterday, but from certain traits and tendencies which I have noticed in you, I am sure, as I remarked just now, that you were born to be a brilliant star in the fashionable world."

"I, madame?" exclaimed the orphan, wonderingly.

"Yes, I am positive of it, for to be the rage it is not absolutely necessary to possess beauty or wealth or aristocratic lineage, or to be a marquise or a duchess, though it must be admitted that this last title aids one very materially. No, no, the one essential, I assure you, is a certain *je ne sais quoi!* You have it; it is the easiest thing in the world to discern it in you."

"Really, madame, you amaze me," exclaimed the poor child, utterly abashed.

"That is very natural, for you, of course, cannot understand this, my dear child; but I, who am studying

you with the proud but jealous eye of a mother, do understand it. I can foresee what you will become, and I rejoice at it. No life can be half as delightful as that of one of society's favourites. Queen of every fête, her life is a continual enchantment. And, now I think of it, to give you some idea of the world of fashion over which you are certainly destined to reign some day, I will take you to the races in the Bois de Boulogne, where you will see the *crème de la crème* of Parisian society. It is a diversion entirely compatible with your mourning."

"Excuse me, madame, but such crowds always frighten me, and — and —"

"My darling child!" exclaimed the baroness, interrupting her ward, "it is useless to oppose me. I am the most obstinate creature in the world. Besides, I insist upon being treated as well as my good sister-in-law. By the way, my dear, tell me right here and now what you two have been plotting to do so early to-morrow morning."

"Mlle. Helena wishes to take me with her to church, madame."

"She is right, my dearest child. One should never neglect one's religious duties; but nine o'clock — that is frightfully early. Women of fashion never go before noon; then one at least has time to make a handsome morning toilet, and one also meets many of one's acquaintances there."

"I am in the habit of rising early, madame, and as Mlle. Helena seemed to prefer going at nine o'clock, it made no difference to me."

"My dear child, I told you a little while ago that I should be appallingly frank with you."

"And I shall thank you very much for it, madame."

"Of course, you ought not to be proud and arrogant because you are the richest heiress in France, but though you should not abuse your power to impose your wishes

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and caprices upon others, there is certainly no need of your going so far as to gratify the caprices of others. Do not forget that your immense wealth — ”

“ Alas ! madame,” said Ernestine, unable to repress two big tears that rose to her eyes and then rolled slowly down her cheeks, “ on the contrary, I am doing my very best to forget this wealth, for it reminds me that I am an orphan.”

“ My poor dear little darling ! ” exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, embracing Ernestine effusively, “ how angry I am with myself for having unintentionally grieved you. Dry those lovely eyes, I beg of you. It makes me wretched to see you weep ! ”

Ernestine wiped away her tears, and the baroness continued, affectionately :

“ Come, my child, you must be brave and sensible. Of course it is a terrible, an irreparable misfortune to be an orphan, but as the misfortune is irreparable you should make the best of it, and say to yourself that you at least are blessed with some devoted relatives and friends, and that, though the past is sad and gloomy, the future may be most brilliant.”

As Madame de la Rochaiguë was thus consoling the orphan, a deprecating rap was heard at the door.

“ Who is it ? ” inquired the baroness.

“ Mlle. de Beaumesnil’s majordomo, who solicits the honour of throwing himself at her feet.”

Ernestine evinced so much surprise that the baroness said, smilingly :

“ It is only one of M. de la Rochaiguë’s jokes. It is he who is at the door.”

Mlle. de Beaumesnil also tried to smile as the baroness said, in a loud voice :

“ Come in, M. majordomo, come in ! ”

Whereupon the baron entered, showing his long teeth more than ever in the broad smile his joke had inspired. Approaching Ernestine with great deference, he bowed

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low before her and even kissed her hand, saying as he did so :

“ Is my charming ward still content with me ? Is anything lacking for her comfort ? Does she find her establishment on a suitable footing ? Has she discovered any inconveniences in her apartments ? Is she satisfied with her servants ? ”

“ There is nothing with which I can find the slightest fault,” answered Ernestine ; “ quite the contrary, indeed, for this magnificent suite of rooms, exclusively for my use, is — ”

“ Nothing can be too handsome or too luxurious for the richest heiress in France,” interrupted the baron, in his most peremptory tones.

“ I am deeply gratified and touched by the affectionate welcome I have received from your family,” said Ernestine ; “ and I assure you that everything else is of very little importance to me.”

Just then the folding doors opened, and the butler announced, in a loud voice : “ Mademoiselle is served.”

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HUNCHBACK MEETS THE HEIRESS.

THE baron offered his arm to Ernestine, and conducted her into the dining-room. Helena came in a few minutes afterwards, a trifle late by reason of having despatched a letter to Abbé Ledoux, announcing her plans for the morrow.

During the entire repast Ernestine was the object of the most obsequious attentions, not only from the baron and his wife and sister, but also from the servants, who were as deeply impressed as their employers by the magical power of those words, "the richest heiress in France."

Towards the end of the meal, the baron, with the most careless air imaginable, remarked to Mlle. de Beaumesnil:

"Well, my dear ward, as you have now recovered from the fatigue of your journey, it seems to me you ought to go out to-morrow and amuse yourself a little."

"Helena and I think so, too," replied Madame de la Rochaiguë, "so your sister is going to take Ernestine to church to-morrow morning. In the afternoon, Mlle. Palmyre and Mlle. Barenne will come with some dresses and hats I ordered yesterday for our dear child, and day after to-morrow Ernestine and I are going for a drive."

"Capital, capital!" exclaimed the baron. "I see that to-morrow and the day after will be fully occupied, but I think it is hardly fair for me to be so entirely left out, so I beg to have my turn on the day following. Will you grant my request?"

"Certainly, with the greatest pleasure," replied Ernestine.

"The readiness of the response increases its value two-fold," said the baron, with such evident gratitude that the orphan was wondering what she could have said when the baroness, turning to her husband, exclaimed :

"Well, let us hear your plans for your day, M. de la Rochaiguë."

"I am not so spiritual-minded as my sister, nor as worldly as you, my dear," answered the baron, "so I am going to propose to our dear ward (weather, of course, permitting) a visit to one of the most beautiful gardens in Paris, where she will see a wonderful collection of plants and flowers."

"You could not have pleased me better, monsieur," exclaimed Ernestine, delightedly. "I am so fond of flowers."

"Nor is that all," added the baron, "for, as I am a prudent man, in case of bad weather, my charming ward and I can enjoy a promenade through several superb conservatories, or a magnificent picture-gallery, rich in masterpieces of the modern school of art."

"And where is this combination of rare and beautiful things to be found, monsieur?" inquired Ernestine, with great interest.

"A nice Parisienne you are, and you, too, baroness, and you, too, my sister," laughed Mlle. de la Rochaiguë, with a knowing air, "for I see very plainly that none of you have the slightest idea where this collection of wonders is to be found, though it is almost at your very door."

"Really," began Mlle. de la Rochaiguë, "I have been trying to think."

"And you can't imagine," retorted the baron, radiant. "Ah, well, I will take pity on you. All these wonders are to be found at the Luxembourg."

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“The Luxembourg!” exclaimed the baroness, laughing. Then, turning to Ernestine:

“Ah, my dear child, it is a trap, an abominable trap, M. de la Rochaiguë has set for you. You don’t know my husband’s passion for another of the wonders of the Luxembourg. He has taken good care not to reveal that, I’ll be bound!”

“And what is this other attraction, madame?” asked the young girl, smiling.

“Ah, you poor, dear innocent, let me tell you that M. de la Rochaiguë is quite capable of taking you to a session of the Chamber of Peers, under pretext of showing you beautiful conservatories and flowers and picture-galleries.”

“Well, why should I not take her into the diplomatic gallery, if she wishes?” retorted the baron. “She will find plenty of good company there in the shape of the fortunate wives of foreign ambassadors and ministers,—for I maintain that there is not a more delightful, charming, and enviable position in the world than that of the wife of a minister and ambassador. Ah, my dear wife,” added this unknown Canning, turning to the baroness, “what would I not give to be able to elevate you to such a position. You would be envied, flattered, adored! You would become, I am sure, a wonderfully clever politician! It is not unlikely that you would even control the state, perhaps. Could any woman desire a grander rôle?”

“You see what a dangerous flatterer M. de la Rochaiguë is, my dear child,” remarked the baroness. “He is quite capable of imbuing you with a taste for politics, too.”

“Me? Oh, I have no fear of that,” responded Ernestine, smiling.

“You may laugh at me as much as you like, my dear,” the baron said to his wife; “but I do assert that I perceive in our dear ward a thoughtfulness, a self-control, and a power of discrimination remarkable in

one of her years, to say nothing of the fact that she strikingly resembles the portrait of the beautiful and famous Duchesse de Longueville, who exerted such a marvellous influence in politics under the Fronde."

"Well, well, this is really too much," exclaimed the baroness, interrupting her husband with a fresh outburst of merriment.

The orphan, who had suddenly become thoughtful, did not join in this gaiety. She was thinking how very strange it was that within the last two hours three persons had, in turn, discovered that she was so singularly adapted to fill three such entirely different rôles, viz.: That of a devotee, that of a woman of fashion, and that of a female politician.

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of carriage-wheels in the courtyard below.

"Haven't you given orders that you are not at home this evening?" inquired the baron, turning to his wife.

"No, but I am expecting no one,—that is, no one but Madame de Mirecourt, who, you know, occasionally drops in for a few minutes on her way to some ball or reception."

"Shall you see her in case she does?"

"If it will not be disagreeable to you, and if you will allow me to receive her in your drawing-room," said the baroness, turning to Ernestine. "She is a very charming woman."

"Do exactly as you please, madame," replied Ernestine, cordially.

"Show the visitor into Mlle. de Beaumesnil's drawing-room," the baroness said to one of the servants.

The man withdrew, but returned a moment afterwards to say:

"I showed the visitor into mademoiselle's drawing-room as madame ordered, but it is not Madame de Mirecourt."

"Who is it, then?"

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"M. le Marquis de Maillefort, madame."

"That detestable man!" exclaimed the baron. "A visit at this hour is an inexcusable familiarity on his part."

The baroness motioned to her husband to be more guarded before the servants; then whispered to Ernestine, who seemed surprised at this incident:

"M. de la Rochaiguë does not like M. de Maillefort, who is really one of the most spiteful and mischief-making hunchbacks imaginable."

"A positive devil!" added Helena.

"It seems to me that I have heard my mother speak of a M. de Maillefort," remarked Ernestine, thoughtfully.

"That is more than likely, my dearest child," replied the baroness, smiling, "though no one ever speaks of M. de Maillefort as one's good angel."

"I do not recollect to have heard her say anything either good or bad about M. de Maillefort," answered the orphan. "I merely remember the name."

"And the name is that of a veritable ogre," said the baron, spitefully.

"But if M. de Maillefort is so objectionable, why do you receive him, madame?" inquired the orphan, hesitatingly.

"Ah, my dear child, in society one is obliged to make many concessions, particularly when a person of M. de Maillefort's birth is concerned."

Then addressing the baron, she added:

"It is impossible to prolong the meal further, for coffee has been served in the drawing-room."

Madame de la Rochaiguë arose from the table. The baron, concealing his annoyance as best he could, offered his arm to his ward, and the entire party returned to the drawing-room where M. de Maillefort was waiting.

The marquis had so long been accustomed to concealing his love for Madame de Beaumesnil,—the one passion of his life, but one which she alone had divined,

— that, on seeing Ernestine, he betrayed none of the interest he felt in her. He remembered, too, not without annoyance, that it would be necessary to appear curt and sarcastic before the orphan, as any sudden change in his manner or language would be sure to arouse the suspicions of the Rochaiguës, and, in order to protect Ernestine from them, and, perhaps, even from herself, or, in other words, to carry out her mother's last wishes, he must carefully refrain from exciting the distrust of those around her.

M. de Maillefort, who was endowed with remarkably acute powers of perception, noted, with a pang of real anguish, the unpleasant impression his appearance seemed to make upon Ernestine ; for the latter, still under the influence of the slanders that had been heaped upon him, had involuntarily shuddered, and averted her gaze from his distorted form.

Painful as the feelings of the marquis were, he had the courage to conceal them, and, advancing towards Madame de la Rochaiguë, with a smile on his lips and an ironical gleam in his eye, he said :

“ I am very bold, am I not, my dear baroness ? But you know, or rather you are ignorant, that one has friends only to impose upon their good nature, at least unless, like Mlle. de la Rochaiguë here,” he added, bowing low to that lady, “ one has no faults at all, but is nothing more or less than an angel descended from heaven for the edification of the faithful. Then it is even worse, I believe, for when one is perfect, one inspires one’s friends with envy, or with admiration, for with many people these two sentiments are one and the same.”

Then, turning to M. de la Rochaiguë, he continued :

“ Am I not right, baron ? I appeal to you who have the good fortune not to wound either by your virtues or your failings.”

The baron smiled until he showed his long teeth in

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the most startling fashion, then, trying to conceal his ill-humour, he exclaimed :

“ Ah, marquis, marquis, always sarcastic, but always charming ! ”

Then seeing that he could not avoid introducing M. de Maillefort to Ernestine, who was watching the hunchback with growing uneasiness, the baron said to his ward :

“ My dear Ernestine, allow me to introduce M. le Marquis de Maillefort, one of my particular friends.”

After bowing to the young girl, who returned the bow with an embarrassed air, the hunchback said, with formal politeness :

“ I am delighted, mademoiselle, to have still another reason for often coming to Madame de la Rochaiguë’s house.”

And as if he considered himself released from the necessity of paying any further attention to the orphan by this commonplace remark, he bowed again, and then took a seat beside the baroness, while her husband tried to conceal his ill-temper by sipping his coffee very slowly, and Helena took Ernestine a few steps aside, under pretext of calling her attention to the plants in a jardinière.

The marquis, without seeming to pay the slightest attention to Ernestine, never once lost sight of them. He had a remarkably keen sense of hearing, and he hoped to catch a few words of the conversation between the devotee and the orphan, while he chatted gaily with Madame de la Rochaiguë, both of them endeavouring to conceal their real thoughts under the airiest persiflage, and to try and discover what the other was driving at, in vulgar parlance.

The frivolous character of such a conversation favoured the hunchback’s intentions, so, while he listened to Madame de la Rochaiguë with a distract ear, he listened eagerly with the other to Ernestine, the baron, and Helena.

The devotee and her brother, believing the marquis absorbed in his conversation with Madame de la Rochaiguë, reminded the orphan, in the course of their conversation, of the promise she had made to accompany Helena to church the next morning at nine o'clock, and also to go with the baron a couple of days afterwards to view the wonders of the Luxembourg.

Though there was nothing extraordinary in these plans, M. de Maillefort's distrust of the Rochaiguë family was so great that he deemed it advisable to neglect no detail, however insignificant it might appear, so he noted these facts carefully, even while replying with his accustomed wit to Madame de la Rochaiguë's commonplaces.

The hunchback's attention had been divided in this way for, perhaps, a quarter of an hour, when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Helena make a whispered remark to Ernestine, accompanied by a glance at Madame de la Rochaiguë, as if to say that it was not worth while to interrupt her conversation, after which the orphan, Helena, and the baron left the room.

Madame de la Rochaiguë did not perceive their intention until the door closed behind them, but their departure suited her perfectly. The presence of other persons would prevent the explanation she considered it absolutely necessary to have with the marquis, for she was too shrewd and too well versed in the ways of the world not to have felt certain, as she had said to her husband, that the marquis, in thus renewing their acquaintance after a long interruption, had been actuated by a desire to meet the heiress, concerning whom, consequently, he must have some secret designs.

The hunchback's love for Madame de Beaumesnil having been suspected by no one, and his last interview with the dying countess being likewise a secret, Madame de la Rochaiguë did not and could not suspect the solicitude the marquis felt concerning Ernestine.

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But wishing to ascertain the designs of the hunchback, so as to circumvent them if they interfered with her own, Madame de la Rochaiguë abruptly changed the subject as soon as the door had closed upon the orphan, by saying :

“ Well, marquis, what do you think of Mlle. de Beaumesnil ? ”

“ I think her very generous.”

“ Very generous, marquis ? What do you mean by that ? ”

“ Why, with her fortune, your ward would have a perfect right to be as ugly and humpbacked as I am. But does she really possess many admirable traits of character ? ”

“ I have known her so short a time, I scarcely know how to answer you.”

“ Why this reticence ? You must feel sure that I did not come to ask your ward’s hand in marriage.”

“ Who knows ? ” retorted the baroness, laughing.

“ I know, and I have told you.”

“ Seriously, marquis, I am positive that at this very moment a hundred matrimonial projects have already been formed — ”

“ Against Mlle. de Beaumesnil ? ”

“ ‘ Against ’ is very suggestive. But one moment, marquis. I wish to be perfectly frank with you.”

“ Indeed ! ” exclaimed the hunchback, in mocking surprise. “ Ah, well, so do I. Come, my dear baroness, let us have this little treat in the way of sincerity, which is such a rare thing, alas ! ”

And M. de Maillefort drew his chair nearer the sofa on which the baroness was seated.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN ORGY OF SINCERITY.

AFTER a moment's silence, Madame de la Rochaiguë, with a penetrating glance at M. de Maillefort, said :

“ Marquis, I understand you.”

“ Bah !”

“ Understand you perfectly.”

“ You do everything to perfection, so this does not surprise me. But let me hear the proofs of these surprising powers of penetration on your part.”

“ For fear of harrowing my feelings too much, I will not count the number of years during which you never set foot in my house, and now you suddenly return with a truly flattering eagerness. So, being a sensible woman, and not a mere bundle of conceit, I say to myself — ”

“ Come, baroness, what is it you say to yourself ?”

“ I say to myself simply this : ‘ After M. de Maillefort's long desertion of me, to what am I now indebted for the novel pleasure of seeing him so often ? It must be because I am Mlle. de Beaumesnil's guardian, and because this most estimable marquis has some special reason for again favouring me with his visits.’ ”

“ You are about right, baroness, upon my word.”

“ What ! you admit it ?”

“ I am compelled to.”

“ You almost make me doubt my powers of penetration by your prompt confession, marquis.”

“ Are we not striving to outdo each other in frankness ?”

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“True; I forgot that.”

“And now I, in my turn, will explain why I so suddenly ceased to visit your house. You see, madame, I am something of a stoic, and when anything gives me very great pleasure I suddenly renounce it, so I may not allow myself to become enervated by too much pleasure. That is why I suddenly ceased to visit you.”

“I would like to believe it, but—”

“You can at least try. As to the resumption of my visits—”

“Ah, that is the most curious part—”

“You have guessed the reason—pretty nearly.”

“Pretty nearly, marquis?”

“Yes, for though I have no special plans in relation to the subject of your ward’s marriage, I can’t help saying to myself that this great heiress is sure to draw a crowd of unscrupulous fortune-hunters around her, and Madame de la Rochaiguë’s house will soon be the scene of all sorts of amusing intrigues. A person who desires to see all the amusing acts of this comedy can view them from the reserved seats, so to speak, in Madame de la Rochaiguë’s house. At my age, and made as I am, I have no other amusement in the world except what observation affords me; so I intend to frequent Madame de la Rochaiguë’s house for that purpose. She will receive me, because she received me years ago, and because, after all, I am not any more stupid, nor any more of a bore than other people. So, from my quiet corner, I will watch the fierce struggle between the rival suitors. This is the truth, and now, baroness, you surely will not be so hard-hearted as to refuse me a place in your drawing-room where I can watch this contest, of which your ward is to be the prize.”

“But, marquis, you are not one of those persons who can watch people fight, without taking a hand in it yourself,” said Madame de la Rochaiguë, shaking her head.

“Well, I can’t say that I am.”

"So you will not remain neutral."

"I don't know about that," answered the marquis.

Then, emphasising the words strongly, he added :

"As I am experienced in the ways of the world, as I have a horror of cowardice and conceit, and as I have always maintained my habit of plain speaking, I admit that if I should see a brave warrior, whose courage and worth have interested me, perfidiously attacked, I should be very likely to come to that person's assistance with all the means at my disposal."

"But this, permit me to say, monsieur," responded the baroness, concealing her anger under a forced laugh, "is nothing more nor less than a sort of inquisition, of which you will be the inquisitor-general, and which will be located in my house."

"Yes, in your house, or elsewhere; for you know, baroness, that if the whim should seize you,—every pretty woman, you know, must have her whims, and you are certainly entitled to a good many of them,—I repeat that, if the whim should seize you, you could easily tell your servants that in future you will never be at home to me."

"Why, marquis, can you suppose — ?"

"I was only jesting," replied M. de Maillefort, dryly. "The baron is too sensible a man to allow your doors to be closed against me without a cause, and he will spare me, I am sure, any explanation on the subject. I have the honour to tell you, my dear baroness, that having resolved to watch these very amusing doings, to see, in fact, how the richest heiress in France is married off, I can establish my point of observation almost anywhere, for, in spite of my diminutive stature, I can manage to see from almost any position, high or low."

"Then, my dear marquis, you must confess that it is an offensive and defensive alliance you are proposing to me," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, with the same forced smile.

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“ Not the least bit in the world. I shall neither be for you nor against you. I shall merely watch what goes on, with a keen eye, and perhaps try to aid this suitor, or to circumvent the other suitor, according to my best judgment and my feeble resources, if the desire seizes me, or rather if justice and truth demand it, for you know I am very peculiar in my notions.”

“ But why not content yourself with the rôle of a looker-on? Why can you not remain neutral ?”

“ Because, as you yourself remarked just now, my dear baroness, I am not one of those persons who can watch others fight without taking a hand in the fight myself.”

“ But,” said Madame de la Rochaiguë, quite at her wits’ end, “ suppose,—and it is merely a supposition, for we have decided not to think of Ernestine’s marriage for a long time yet,—suppose, I say, that we did have some one in view for her, what would you do ?”

“ I haven’t the slightest idea, upon my word !”

“ Come, come, M. le marquis, you are not acting fairly with me. You have some scheme of your own.”

“ Nothing of the kind. I do not know Mlle. de Beaumesnil; I have no suitor to suggest for her. I am, consequently, an entirely disinterested looker-on, and, this being the case, my dear baroness, I do not exactly understand why you should have any objection to my watching the amusing proceedings.”

“ That is true,” said Madame de la Rochaiguë, recovering her composure, “ for, after all, in marrying Ernestine, what can we have in view, except her happiness ?”

“ Nothing, of course.”

“ Consequently, we have nothing to fear from your observation, as you call it, my dear marquis.”

“ Nothing, absolutely nothing.”

“ For, in case we should make a mistake — ”

“ Which may happen to any one, even one who has the best intentions in the world.”

“ Certainly, marquis. Well, in that event, you would

not fail to come to our assistance, and warn us of our danger."

"That is what an observer is for," laughingly remarked M. de Maillefort, rising to take leave.

"What, marquis, you are going so soon?"

"To my great regret. I must make the tour of five or six drawing-rooms, to hear what people are saying about your young heiress. You have no idea how amusing, curious, and sometimes revolting the remarks upon the subject of her immense dowry are!"

"Ah, well, my dear marquis," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, offering her hand to the hunchback in the most cordial manner, "I hope to see you often, very often; and as all this seems to interest you so much, I shall keep you fully posted."

"And I, too, will promise to tell you everything I hear. It will be wonderfully amusing. And, by the way," added the marquis, with the most careless air imaginable, though he had come to Madame de la Rochaiguë's house as much to endeavour to secure some light upon an as yet impenetrable mystery as to see Ernestine,—"by the way, did you ever hear anything about an illegitimate child that M. de Beaumesnil left?"

"M. de Beaumesnil?" asked the baroness, with evident surprise.

"Yes," replied the hunchback, for, in putting the question thus, he hoped to attain his object without endangering the secret he thought he had discovered in relation to Madame de Beaumesnil; "yes, did you never hear that M. de Beaumesnil had an illegitimate child?"

"No," replied the baroness, "this is the first time I ever heard of any such rumour, though a long while ago there was some talk about a liaison the countess had prior to her marriage. It must, consequently, have been in connection with her that you heard this story of an illegitimate child, but I, myself, have never heard anything on the subject before."

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“Then whether this rumour relates to the count or the countess, there is evidently not the slightest truth in it, my dear baroness, for, by reason of your close connection with the family, you would have been sure to know of the matter.”

“And I assure you, marquis, that we have never heard or seen anything that would lead us to suppose that either M. or Madame de Beaumesnil left any illegitimate child.”

M. de Maillefort, who was endowed with an unusual amount of penetration, as well as tact, now felt fully convinced of Madame de la Rochaiguë’s entire ignorance of the existence of any illegitimate child, and the failure of this fresh attempt on his part caused him deep chagrin, particularly as he began to despair of discovering any trace of this unknown child, and of thus complying with Madame de Beaumesnil’s dying request.

Madame de la Rochaiguë, without appearing to notice the hunchback’s preoccupation, continued, gaily:

“It is really very amusing to listen to all the rumours that are afloat concerning our ward’s inheritance, as well as the large but singular legacies left by the countess.”

“Indeed?”

“There is little or no foundation for these absurd reports,” continued the baroness, in supercilious tones, for she had always disliked Madame de Beaumesnil. “The countess left a few trifling legacies to three or four old retainers, and small gratuities to her other servants. That is all the magnificent legacies, of which everybody is talking, amount to. But while the countess was in such a generous mood, she ought not to have been guilty of the ingratitude of forgetting a poor girl to whom she certainly owed some recognition of her services.”

“To whom do you refer?” asked the marquis, concealing the pain he felt on hearing the baroness thus asperse Madame de Beaumesnil’s memory. “Of what young girl are you speaking?”

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“ You have not heard, then, that, during the last days of her life, the countess, at the advice of her physician, summoned to her bedside a young and talented musician, who assisted not a little in assuaging the lady’s sufferings ? ”

“ It seems to me that I do recollect hearing this fact spoken of,” answered the marquis.

“ Well, does it not seem monstrous that the countess did not leave even a slight legacy to this poor girl ? It may have been an oversight on her part, but, to me, it looks exceedingly like ingratitude.”

The marquis knew Madame de Beaumesnil’s kindness and nobility of heart so well that he, too, was struck by this apparent forgetfulness of the young artiste’s claims.

After a moment of reflection, however, he vaguely felt that, inasmuch as such an oversight, if real, was inexplicable, there must have been something more than a mere failure of memory in the circumstance, so he said :

“ You are sure, madame, that this young girl received no remuneration from Madame de Beaumesnil for her services ? You are positive of it ? ”

“ We were so unanimously convinced of the fact,” replied the baroness, delighted at this opportunity to show her generosity, “ that, deplored this ingratitude on the part of the countess, we decided to send five hundred francs to the young girl.”

“ That was only just.”

“ I think so, too, but what do you think came of it ? ”

“ I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“ Well, the young artiste brought the five hundred francs back to us and told us that she had been paid.”

“ She must be a noble-hearted girl,” exclaimed the marquis ; “ but you see from that, that the countess had not forgotten the young musician, after all. Doubtless, she must have given her a suitable token of her gratitude while she was alive instead of leaving her a legacy.”

“ You would not think so, monsieur, if you had seen

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how indicative of decent poverty the young girl's garments were. She would certainly have been better dressed if she had been a recipient of Madame de Beaumesnil's bounty. In fact, the young artiste, who, by the way, is wonderfully handsome, so excited my compassion and admiration by the delicacy of her conduct that I suggested she should come and give Ernestine music lessons."

" You did ? Why, that was very noble of you ! "

" Your astonishment is not very flattering, marquis."

" You mistake admiration for astonishment, baroness. I am not surprised in the least. I know the wonderful kindness and gentleness of your heart too well," added M. de Maillefort, concealing his hope that he had at last found the desired clue under his usual persiflage.

" Instead of making fun of my kindness of heart, marquis," replied Madame de la Rochaiguë, " you ought to imitate it by endeavouring to procure the poor young girl some pupils among your numerous acquaintances."

" Certainly," replied the marquis, rather indifferently, however ; " I will do the best I can for your protégée, though I am not considered much of a musical connoisseur, I fear. But what is this young girl's name, and where does she live ? "

" Her name is Herminie, and she lives on the Rue de Monceau. I don't remember the number, but I will ascertain and let you know."

" I will secure some pupils for Mlle. Herminie if I can ; but, in return, if I should ever ask your protection for some suitor for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand,—some suitor whom I see getting the worst of it in the mêlée, you will grant my request, will you not ? "

" You set a high value on your services, I must say, marquis," replied the baroness, laughing in a very constrained way ; " but I am sure we shall come to an amicable understanding."

" You can not imagine how deeply I rejoice in advance

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at the touching harmony which is henceforth to exist between us, my dear baroness. Well, after all, let us admit that this little orgy of sincerity has been of immense advantage to us. We are full of confidence in each other now, are we not, my dear baroness ? ”

“ Unquestionably, and mutual confidence, alas, is so rare ! ” exclaimed the baroness, with a sigh.

“ But all the more precious when it is found, eh, my dear baroneess ? ”

“ Unquestionably, my dear marquis. *Au revoir*, then, if you must go. I shall hope to see you again very soon.”

“ I trust so,” responded M. de Maillefort, as he left the room.

“ Detestable man ! ” exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, springing from the sofa, and beginning to pace the room excitedly, while she gave vent to her long-repressed feelings. “ Every word that accursed hunchback uttered contained either a sarcasm or a threat,” she added, venomously.

“ He’s a contemptible scoundrel ! There isn’t the slightest doubt of it,” exclaimed the baron, suddenly drawing aside the portières at one of the doors opening into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN INVOLUNTARY AVERSION.

ON seeing M. de la Rochaiguë thus reappear near the sofa where she had sat during her conversation with M. de Maillefort, the baroness exclaimed :

“ What, monsieur, were you there ? ”

“ Certainly, for suspecting that your interview with M. de Maillefort would prove exceedingly interesting as soon as you two were left alone together, I slipped into the little salon, and have been listening there behind the portières close to you.”

“ You heard what that detestable marquis said, then ? ”

“ Yes, madame, and I also noticed that you were so weak as to ask him to come again, instead of giving him plainly to understand that his presence here was no longer desired. You had a fine opportunity to do it, and you should have availed yourself of it.”

“ But, monsieur, is not the Marquis de Maillefort as dangerous in one place as another ? He made me understand that very plainly ; besides, one can not treat a man of M. de Maillefort’s lineage and importance in a rude manner.”

“ What do you suppose would happen if you did ? ”

“ This : the marquis would undoubtedly demand satisfaction of you for such an insult. Are you not aware that he has fought a number of duels, all of which resulted disastrously for his opponents, and have you not heard that only a few days ago he forced M. de Mornand

to fight merely on account of an ill-timed jest in which the latter indulged ? ”

“ But I, madame, am not as obliging and simple as M. de Mornand. I would not have fought.”

“ Then, M. de Maillefort would have made your life a burden by his sneers and ridicule, until you would have been compelled to hide yourself from very shame.”

“ But are there no laws to protect a man from such a monster ? Ah, if I were in the Chamber of Peers such scandalous proceedings should not go unpunished ! An honest man should not be at the mercy of the first cut-throat that happens to come along ! ” exclaimed the indignant baron. “ But in heaven’s name, what is the matter with him,—what does this damned marquis want, anyhow ? ”

“ You must have very little penetration, monsieur, for he certainly talked with almost brutal frankness, it seemed to me. Others would have resorted to circumlocution and even falsehood, but M. de Maillefort ? — no, ‘ You intend to marry off Mlle. de Beaumesnil,’ he says. ‘ I intend to see in what manner and to whom you marry her, and if your choice does not please me I shall interfere.’ This is what he had the audacity to say to me, and he is in a position to carry out his threat.”

“ Fortunately, Ernestine seems to have taken an intense dislike to this horrid hunchback, and Helena must tell her that he was the mortal enemy of the countess.”

“ What good will that do ? Suppose we should find a party that suited us and Ernestine, isn’t the marquis, by his sneers and sarcasms, quite capable of inspiring the innocent girl with an aversion for the very person we want her to marry ? And it is not only here, in this house, that he can play us this shameful trick,— and many others that he is capable of concocting,— but he can do it anywhere and everywhere he meets Ernestine, for we cannot hide her. We shall be obliged to take her out into society.”

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"Is it this that you fear most? I should be of the same opinion, perhaps, if —"

"Do you suppose I know what I fear? I would a hundred times rather have some real danger to contend with, no matter how threatening it might be, for then I should at least know what the danger was, and perhaps contrive to escape it, while now the marquis will keep us in a state of perplexity that may cause us to commit a thousand blunders, and hamper us in every way. Consequently there is nothing for us to do but look the situation straight in the face and say to ourselves: 'Here is a man of wonderful discernment and diabolical cleverness, who sees, or will endeavour to see and know, all that we do, and who, unfortunately, has a thousand means of attaining his ends, while we have no means whatever of escaping his surveillance.'"

"I am more and more convinced that the opinion I expressed a short time ago is a just and correct one," said the baron, complacently.

"What opinion?"

"That the marquis is an abominable scoundrel."

"Good evening, monsieur," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, wrathfully, starting towards the door.

"What, you are going like that when we are in such desperate straits, and without coming to any decision!"

"Decision about what?"

"Why, about what we shall do in the matter."

"I know one thing!" exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, completely beside herself, and stamping her foot angrily, "this abominable hunchback has demoralised me completely, and you — you finish by utterly stupefying me with your asinine remarks."

And Madame de la Rochaiguë flounced out of the room, slamming the door violently in the baron's very face.

During the conversation between Madame de la Rochai-

guë and M. de Maillefort, Helena had taken Mlle. de Beaumesnil back to her own room. As she was about to leave the young girl she said :

“ Sleep well, my dear Ernestine, and pray to the Saviour that he will not allow the face of that frightful M. de Maillefort to trouble your dreams.”

“ I really don’t know why it is, mademoiselle, but he almost terrifies me.”

“ The feeling is very natural,” replied the devotee, gently ; “ more natural than you suppose, for if you knew — ”

As Helena paused, the young girl said :

“ You did not finish, mademoiselle.”

“ There are some things which it pains one to say against one’s neighbour, even though he may deserve it,” remarked the devotee, with a saintly air. “ This M. de Maillefort — ”

“ Well, mademoiselle ? ”

“ I am afraid of paining you, my dear Ernestine — ”

“ Go on, I beg of you, mademoiselle.”

“ Ah, well, as you insist, I am compelled to tell you that this Marquis de Maillefort has always been one of your mother’s bitterest enemies.”

“ My mother’s ? ” cried Mlle. de Beaumesnil, wonderingly.

Then she added, with touching naïveté :

“ Some one must have deceived you, mademoiselle. My mother could not have had any enemies.”

In a tone of tender commiseration, Helena replied, shaking her head :

“ My dear child, such artlessness does your heart credit ; but, alas ! the best and most inoffensive people are exposed to the animosity of the wicked. Have not the gentle lambs ravening wolves for enemies ? ”

“ But how had my mother ever wronged M. de Maillefort, mademoiselle ? ” asked Ernestine, with tears in her eyes.

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“Why, in no way. Just Heaven ! one might as well say that an innocent dove would attack a tiger.”

“Then what was the cause of M. de Maillefort’s animosity ?”

“Alas ! my poor child, I cannot tell you that. It would be too revolting — too horrible,” answered Helena, sighing heavily.

“Then I have good cause to loathe this man, and yet I blamed myself for yielding to my involuntary aversion.”

“Ah, my dearest child, may you never have a less justifiable aversion,” said the devotee, sanctimoniously, lifting her eyes heavenward.

Then she added :

“I must leave you, now, my dear Ernestine. Sleep sweetly. To-morrow morning, at nine o’clock, I will come for you to go to church.”

“Good-bye until to-morrow, mademoiselle ; but, alas ! you leave me with sad thoughts,— my mother had an enemy.”

“It is best to know the real character of the wicked, my dear Ernestine, for then one can at least guard against their evil doing. And now good-bye until to-morrow morning.”

“Good night, mademoiselle.”

So Mlle. de la Rochaiguë departed, proud of the perfidious cunning with which she had aroused a cruel distrust of M. de Maillefort in Mlle. de Beaumesnil’s heart.

Ernestine left alone, rang for her governess, who also acted as her personal attendant.

Madame Laîné entered.

She was about forty years of age, with a somewhat insipid face, and a pleasant, though rather obsequious manner, in which there was a touch of servility that made it very different from the devotion of a faithful nurse, which is always instinct with the dignity of disinterested affection.

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“Does mademoiselle wish to retire?” asked Madame Lafn .

“No, my good Lafn , not yet. Bring me my writing-desk, please.”

“Yes, mademoiselle.”

The desk having been brought from Ernestine’s chamber, her governess said :

“There is something I wish to tell mademoiselle.”

“What is it?”

“Madame has hired two other maids for mademoiselle, and —”

“I have told you that I require no other personal attendants than you and Th r se.”

“I know it, mademoiselle, and I said as much to madame, but she thinks you are not sufficiently well served.”

“You satisfy me perfectly.”

“But madame says these young women are to stay in case you should need them, and this suits all the better as madame dismissed her own maid recently, and these women are to attend her in the meantime.”

“That is all very well,” responded Ernestine, indifferently.

“Mademoiselle desires nothing?”

“No, I thank you.”

“Does mademoiselle find herself comfortable here?”

“Very comfortable.”

“The apartments are certainly superb, but there is nothing too good for mademoiselle. Every one says so.”

“My good Lafn , you may put out what I shall require for the night,” said Ernestine, without paying any attention to the governess’s remark. “I can undress without your assistance, but I would like you to wake me a little before eight to-morrow morning.”

“Yes, mademoiselle.”

Madame Lafn  turned as if to leave the room, but

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as Ernestine opened her desk to write, the governess paused, and said :

“ I have a favour to ask of mademoiselle.”

“ What is it ? ”

“ I should be very grateful to mademoiselle if she would have the goodness to spare me a couple of hours to-morrow, or the day after, to go and see a relative of mine, Madame Herbaut, who lives in the Batignolles.”

“ Very well, go to-morrow morning, while I am at church.”

“ I thank mademoiselle for her kindness.”

“ Good-night, my good Lafné,” said Ernestine, thus dismissing her governess, who seemed inclined to continue the conversation.

This interview gives a pretty correct idea of the relations that existed between Mlle. de Beaumesnil and Madame Lafné.

The latter had often endeavoured to establish herself on a more familiar footing with her young mistress, but at the very first effort in this direction Mlle. de Beaumesnil always put an end to the conversation, not haughtily nor curtly, but by giving some order in a kindly way.

After Madame Lafné’s departure, Ernestine remained lost in thought for some time ; then, seating herself at the table, on which her desk had been placed, she opened it and took out a small book bound in Russia leather, the first leaves of which were already filled.

The history of this book was simple but touching.

On her departure for Italy, Ernestine had promised her mother to write every day a sort of diary of her journey. This promise the girl had kept until the sorrowful days that immediately followed her father’s fatal accident, and the even more terrible days that followed the news of the Comtesse de Beaumesnil’s death ; and now that she had rallied a little from these crushing blows, Ernestine found a sort of pious consolation in continuing

to write to her mother every day, keeping up the both pleasant and cruel illusion by continuing these confidential revelations.

The first part of this book contained copies of the letters Ernestine had written to her mother while that lady was living.

The second part, separated from the first by a black cross, contained the letters which the poor child had, alas ! had no need to recopy.

Mlle. de Beaumesnil seated herself at the table, and, after she had wiped away the tears which the sight of this book always evoked, she wrote as follows :

“ I have not written to you, my darling mamma, since my arrival at M. de la Rochaiguë’s house, because I wished to analyse my first impressions carefully.

“ Besides, you know how peculiar I am, and how, whenever I go to a strange place now, I find myself almost dazed for a day or two by the change. It seems as if I must have time to become accustomed to the new objects by which I am surrounded, to recover my mental faculties.

“ The apartments set aside for my exclusive use are so magnificent and so spacious that I felt lost in them yesterday, but to-day I am becoming more accustomed to them.

“ Madame de la Rochaiguë and her husband and sister have welcomed me as if I were their own child. They lavish every attention and kindness upon me, and if one could have any feeling save gratitude, for such a cordial reception, I should feel amazed that persons so much older than I am, should treat me with so much deference.

“ M. de la Rochaiguë, my guardian, is kindness itself. His wife, who quite spoils me by her tenderness, is of a very gay and lively disposition. Mlle. Helena, her sister-in-law, is the gentlest and most saintly person imaginable.

“ You see, my dearest mother, that you need feel no

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anxiety concerning your poor Ernestine's lot. Surrounded by such devoted friends, she is as happy as she can be, now.

" My chief desire is to become better acquainted with M. de la Rochaiguë and his family, for then they will doubtless treat me with less ceremony, and cease to pay me compliments which embarrass me greatly, but which they probably feel obliged to pay me in order to make me feel at ease.

" They are so kind that each person in turn seems to be racking his or her brain for the pleasantest and most complimentary thing they can say to me. By and by, I hope that they will see they do not need to flatter me to gain my affection. One would almost suppose from their manner that they were under the greatest obligations to me for being allowed to receive me into their household. This does not surprise me much, however, my dearest mother, for how often you have told me that refined people always seem grateful for the services they are able to render others.

" I have had some very painful moments to-day, — not by any fault of my guardian or his family, however.

" This morning, a gentleman (my notary, as I learned afterwards) was introduced to me by my guardian, who said :

" ' My dear ward, I think it would be well for you to know the precise amount of your fortune, and this gentleman will now tell you.'

" Whereupon, the notary, opening a book he had brought with him, showed me the last page all covered with figures, and said :

" ' Mademoiselle, from the exact' — he used a word here that I have forgotten — ' your yearly income amounts to the sum of three million one hundred and twenty thousand francs, which gives you nearly eight thousand francs a day, so you are the richest heiress in France.'

"This, my poor dear mother, reminded me again of what, alas! I scarcely ever forget,—that I was an orphan, and alone in the world; and in spite of all my efforts to control my feelings, I wept bitterly."

Ernestine was obliged to stop writing. Her tears had burst forth afresh, for to this tender-hearted, artless child, this rich inheritance meant the loss of her mother and of her father.

Becoming calmer after a few moments, she resumed her pen, and continued:

"It is difficult for me to explain it, but on learning that I had eight thousand francs a day, as the notary said, I felt a great awe, not unmixed with fear.

"So much money — just for myself! why is it?" I thought.

"It seemed to me unjust.

"What had I done to be so rich?

"And then those words which had made me weep, 'You are the richest heiress in France,' almost terrified me.

"Yes; I know not how to explain it, but the knowledge that I possessed this immense fortune made me feel strangely uneasy. It seemed to me that I must feel as people feel who have a great treasure, and who tremble at the thought of the dangers they will incur if any one tries to rob them of it.

"And yet, no; this comparison is not a just one, for I never cared very much for the money you and my father gave me each month to gratify my fancies.

"In fact, I seem unable to analyse my feelings when I think of my wealth, as they call it. It is strange and inexplicable, but perhaps I shall feel differently by and by.

"In the meantime, I am surrounded by the kindest, and most devoted of relatives. What can I have to fear? It is pure childishness on my part, undoubtedly. But to whom can I tell everything, if not to you? M. de la

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Rochaiguë and the other members of his household are wonderfully kind to me, but I shall never make confidants of them. You know I have always been very reserved to every one but you and my father; and I often reproach myself for not being more familiar with my good Lafné, who has been with me several years. But anything like familiarity is impossible to me, though I am far from being proud."

Then alluding to the aversion she felt for M. de Maillefort, in consequence of Mlle. Helena's calumnies, Ernestine added :

"I was cruelly hurt this evening, but it was such a disgraceful thing that, out of respect to you, my dear mother, I will not write it, nor do I really believe that I should have the courage.

"Good night, my darling mamma. To-morrow and the day following, I am going to nine o'clock mass with Mlle. de la Rochaiguë. She is so good and kind that I could not refuse. But my most fervent prayers, my dear mother, are those I offer up in solitude. To-morrow morning and other mornings, in the midst of the careless crowd, I shall pray for you, but it is when I am alone, as now, that my every thought and my very soul lifts itself to thee, and that I pray to thee as one prays to God — my beloved and sainted mother!"

After having replaced the book in the writing-desk, the key of which she wore always suspended around her neck, the orphan sought her couch, and slept much more calmly and peacefully now she had made these artless confessions to an — alas! — now immortal mother.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

ON the morning following the day on which M. de Maillefert had been introduced to Mlle. de Beaumesnil for the first time, Commander Bernard was lying stretched out in the comfortable armchair which had been a present from Olivier.

It was a beautiful summer morning, and the old sailor gazed out sadly through the window on the parched flower beds, now full of weeds, for a month before two of the veteran's old wounds had reopened, keeping him a prisoner in his armchair, and preventing him from working in his beloved garden.

The housekeeper was seated near the commander, busy with some sewing, but for several minutes she must have been indulging in her usual recriminations against "Bû-û-onaparte," for she was now saying to the veteran, in tones of bitter indignation :

"Yes, monsieur, raw, raw ; I tell you he ate it raw !"

The veteran, when his acute suffering abated a little, could not help laughing at the housekeeper's absurd stories, so he said :

"What was it that this diabolical Corsican ogre ate raw, Mother Barbançon ?"

"His beef, monsieur ! Yes, the night before the battle he ate his meat raw ! And do you know why ?"

"No," answered the veteran, turning himself with difficulty in his armchair ; "I can not imagine, I am sure."

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"The wretch did it to render himself more ferocious, so he would have the courage to see his soldiers exterminated by the enemy,—above all, the conscripts," added the indignant housekeeper. "His sole object in life was to provide food for cannon, as he said, and so to depopulate France by conscriptions that there would not be a single Frenchman left. That was his diabolical scheme!"

Commander Bernard replied to this tirade by another loud burst of laughter.

"Let me ask just this one question," he said. "If Bonaparte desired that there shouldn't be another Frenchman left in France, who the devil would he have had to reign over, then?"

"Why, negroes, of course," snapped the housekeeper, shrugging her shoulders impatiently, and acting quite as if an absurdly easy question had been put to her.

It was such a ridiculous answer, and so entirely unexpected, that a moment of positive stupefaction preceded a fresh outburst of hilarity on the part of the commander, who, as soon as he could control his mirth a little, inquired:

"Negroes, what negroes?"

"Why, those American negroes with whom he was always plotting, and who, while he was on his rock, began a tunnel which, starting at Champ-d'Asile, and passing under St. Helena, was intended to transport to the capital of the empire other negroes, friends of the American negroes, so Bû-û-onaparte, in company with his odious Roustan, could return to ravage all France."

"Really, Mother Barbançon," exclaimed the veteran, admiringly, "I never knew your imagination to soar to such sublime heights before."

"I don't see that there is anything to laugh at, monsieur. Would you like to have conclusive proof that the monster always intended to replace the French by negroes?"

"I should indeed, Mother Barbançon," exclaimed the veteran, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. "Come, let us have the proof."

"Ah, well, monsieur, hasn't everybody said for years that your Bû-û-onaparte treated the French like so many negroes?"

"Bravo, Mother Barbançon, bravo!"

"Well, isn't that proof enough that he would like to have had all negroes instead of Frenchmen under his thumb?"

"Thanks, Mother Barbançon!" exclaimed the poor commander, fairly writhing with merriment. "But this is too much, really too much!"

Two loud and imperious peals of the bell made the housekeeper spring from her chair and hurry out of the room, exclaiming:

"There is some one who rings in a lordly way, I must say."

And closing the door of the veteran's chamber behind her, Madame Barbançon flew to admit the visitor.

This proved to be a stout man about fifty years of age, wearing the uniform of a second lieutenant in the National Guard,—a uniform that gaped in a ridiculous manner behind, and disclosed to view in front an enormous stomach, over which dangled a big gold chain. This personage, who wore an immense bearskin hat that nearly covered his eyes, had a pompous and extremely self-important air.

On beholding him, Madame Barbançon knit her brows, and, evidently not very deeply impressed by the dignity of this citizen soldier, asked, in a decidedly sharp tone:

"What, you here again?"

"It would be very strange if an owner"—the word owner was uttered with the majestic air of a ruling sovereign—"if an owner could not come into his own house, when—"

"You are not in your own house, for you have rented it to the commander."

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“ This is the seventeenth of the month, and my porter has sent me a printed notice that my rent has not been paid, so I — ”

“ We all know that. This is the third time in the last two days that you have been here to dun us. Do you expect us to give you our last cent for the rent? We'll pay you when we can, and that is all there is about it.”

“ When you can? A house owner is not to be paid in promises.”

“ House owner! You can boast of being a house owner only because for the last twenty years you've been putting pepper in your brandy and chicory in your coffee, as well as dipping your candles in boiling water to melt off the tallow without anybody's discovering it, and with the proceeds of this cheating you've perhaps bought a few houses. I don't see anything to be so proud of in that, do you? ”

“ I have been a grocer, it is true. It is also true that I made money in my business, and I am proud of the fact, madame.”

“ You have no reason to be. Besides, if you are rich, how can you have the heart to torment a worthy man like the commander merely because he is a little behind in his rent—for the first time, too, in over three years.”

“ I don't care anything about that. Pay me my money, or out you go! It is very astonishing; people can't pay their rent, but they must have gardens and every modern convenience, these fastidious tenants of mine! ”

“ Come, come, M. Bouffard, don't go too far or you may be sorry for it! Of course he must have a garden, this brave man, crippled with wounds, for a garden is his only pleasure in life. If, instead of sticking to your counter, you had gone to the wars like the commander, and shed your blood in the four quarters of the globe, and in Russia, you wouldn't own any more houses than he does! Go, and see if you do! ”

"Once, twice, I ask, will you pay me to-day?"

"Three times, a hundred times, and a thousand times, no! Since the commander's wound reopened, he can sleep only with the aid of opium. That drug is as costly as gold itself, and the one hundred and fifty francs he has received has had to go in medicine and doctor's visits."

"I don't care anything about your reasons. House owners would be in a nice fix if they listened to their tenants' excuses. It was just the same at one of my houses on the Rue de Monceau where I've just been. My tenant there is a music teacher, who can't pay her rent because she's been sick, she says, and hasn't been able to give lessons as usual. The same old story! When a person is sick, he ought to go to the hospital, and give you a chance to find another tenant."

"The hospital! Commander Bernard go to the hospital!" cried the now thoroughly exasperated housekeeper. "No, not even if I have to go out as a ragpicker at night, and nurse him in the daytime, he sha'n't go to the hospital, understand that, but you run a great risk of going there yourself if you don't clear out, for M. Olivier is coming back, and he'll give you more kicks in your miserable stomach than you have hairs in your bearskin cap."

"I would like to see any other house owner who would allow himself to be abused in this fashion in his own house. But enough of this. I'll be back at four o'clock, and if the hundred and fifty francs are not ready for me, I'll seize your furniture."

"And I'll seize my fire-shovel and give you the reception you deserve!"

And the housekeeper slammed the door in M. Bouffard's face, and went back to the commander. His fit of hilarity was over, but he was still in a very good humour, so, on seeing Madame Barbançon return with cheeks blazing with anger, the old sailor said to her:

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

"Well, it seems that you didn't expend all your wrath upon Bonaparte, Mother Barbançon. Who the devil are you in such a rage with now?"

"With some one who isn't a bit better than your Emperor, I can tell you that. The two would make a pretty pair. Bah!"

"And who is it that is such a good match for the emperor, Mother Barbançon?"

"It is—"

But the housekeeper suddenly checked herself.

"Poor, dear man," she thought, "it would almost kill him if I should tell him that the rent isn't paid, that the expenses of his illness have eaten up every penny of his money, as well as sixty francs of my own. I'll wait until M. Olivier comes. He may have some good news for us."

"What the deuce are you mooning about there instead of answering me, Mother Barbançon? Is it some new atrocity of the little corporal's that you are going to treat me to?"

"How glad I am! That must be M. Olivier," cried the housekeeper, hearing the bell ring again, gently this time.

And again leaving her employer, Madame Barbançon ran to the door. It was, indeed, the commander's nephew this time.

"Well, M. Olivier?" asked the housekeeper, anxiously.

"We are saved," replied the young man, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "My worthy friend, the mason, had some difficulty in getting the money he owed me, for I had not told him I should want it so soon, but here are the two hundred francs at last," said Olivier, handing a little bag of coin to the housekeeper.

"What a relief it is, M. Olivier."

"Why, has the landlord been here again?"

"He just left, the scoundrel! I told him pretty plainly what I thought of him."

"But, my dear Madame Barbançon, when one owes a man money, one must pay it. But my poor uncle suspects nothing, does he ?"

"No, not a thing, I'm glad to say."

"So much the better."

"Such a capital idea has just struck me !" exclaimed the vindictive housekeeper, as she counted the money the young man had just handed her. "Such a capital idea !"

"What is it, Mother Barbançon ?"

"That scoundrel will be back here at four o'clock, and I'm going to make up a hot fire in my cook-stove and put thirty of these five-franc pieces in it, and when that monster of a M. Bouffard comes, I'll tell him to wait a minute, and then I'll go and take the money out with my tongs and pile the coins up on the table, and then I'll say to him, 'There's your money ; take it.' That will be fine, M. Olivier, won't it. The law doesn't forbid that, does it ?"

"So you want to fire red-hot bullets at all the rich grocers, do you ?" laughed Olivier. "Do better than that. Save your charcoal, and give the hundred and fifty francs to M. Bouffard cold."

"You are entirely too good-natured, M. Olivier. Let me at least spoil his pretty face with my nails, the brigand."

"Nonsense ! He's much more stupid than wicked."

"He's both, M. Olivier, he's both, I tell you !"

"But how is my uncle this morning ? I went out so early that he was still asleep, and I didn't like to wake him."

"He is feeling better, for he and I just had a fine dispute about his monster. And then your return, why, it is worth more to him than all the medicines in the world, and when I think that but for you that frightful Bouffard might have turned us out in three or four days ! And Heaven knows that our belongings wouldn't have

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brought much, for our six tablespoons and the commander's watch went when he was ill three years ago."

"My good Mother Barbançon, don't talk of that, or you will drive me mad, for when my furlough is over I shall not be here, and what happened to-day may happen again at any time. But I won't even think of it. It is too terrible!"

The commander's bell rang, and on hearing the sound the housekeeper said to the young man, whose face wore an almost heart-broken expression :

"That is the commander ringing. For heaven's sake don't look so sad, M. Olivier; he will be sure to suspect something."

"You needn't be afraid of that. But, by the way, Gerald is sure to call this morning. You must let him in."

"All right, M. Olivier. Go to the commander at once, and I will soon have your breakfast ready. Dear me, M. Olivier," she continued, with a sigh, "can you be content with—"

"My dear, good woman," cried the young soldier, without allowing her to finish, "don't I always have enough? Aren't you always depriving yourself of something to give it to me?"

"Hush! Monsieur is ringing again. Hasten to him at once!"

And Olivier obeyed.

CHAPTER XXV.

MATRIMONIAL INTENTIONS DISCLOSED.

AT the sight of Olivier, the commander's features assumed a joyful expression, and, not being able to rise from his armchair, he held out both hands to his nephew, saying :

“ Good morning, my boy.”

“ Good morning, uncle.”

“ I feel strongly inclined to scold you.”

“ Me, uncle ?”

“ Certainly. Though you only returned yesterday you were off this morning almost before sunrise. I woke quite early, happy in the thought that I was not alone, as I have been for two months past. I glance over at your bed, but no Olivier is to be seen. You had already flown.”

“ But, uncle — ”

“ But, my boy, you have cheated me out of nearly two months of your leave already. A hitch in your master mason's business matters, you told me. So be it; but now, thanks to the earnings of these two months, you must be almost a millionaire, so I intend to enjoy your society from this on. You have earned plenty of money. As it is for me that you are always working, I cannot prevent you from making me presents, and Heaven only knows what you are plotting to do with your millions this very minute, M. Croesus; but I tell you one thing, if you leave me as much of the time alone as you did before you went away, I will not accept another present from you. I swear I will not ! ”

MATRIMONIAL INTENTIONS DISCLOSED. .

“ But, uncle, listen to me — ”

“ You have only two more months to spend with me, and I am determined to make the most of them. What is the use of working as you do ? Do you suppose that, with a manager like Mother Barbançon, my purse is not always full ? Only two or three days ago I said to her : ‘ Well, Madame Steward, how are we off for funds ? ’ ‘ You needn’t worry about that, monsieur,’ she replied ; ‘ when one has more than one spends, there is a plenty.’ I tell you that a cashier who answers like that is a comfort.”

“ Oh, well, uncle,” said Olivier, anxious to put an end to this embarrassing conversation, “ I promise that I will leave you as little as possible henceforth. Now, one thing more, do you feel able to see Gerald this morning ? ”

“ Why, of course. What a kind and loyal heart that young duke has ! When I think that during your absence he came here again and again to see me, and smoke his cigar with me ! I was suffering the torments of the damned, but somehow he managed to make me feel ever so much more comfortable. ‘ Olivier is away,’ he said to me, ‘ and it is my business to look after you.’ ”

“ My good Gerald ! ” murmured Olivier, deeply moved.

“ Yes, he is good. A young man of his position, who leaves his pleasures, his sweethearts, and friends of his own age, to come and spend two or three hours with an old cripple like me, proves conclusively that he has a good heart. But I’m not a conceited fool, I know very well that it was on your account that Gerald came to see me, my dear nephew, and because he knew it would give you pleasure.”

“ No, no, uncle. It was for your sake, and for yours alone, believe me ! ”

“ Hum ! ”

“ He will tell you so himself, presently, for he wrote yesterday to ask if he would find us at home this morning.”

"Alas! he is only too certain to find me; I cannot budge from my armchair. You see the melancholy proof of that," added the old sailor, pointing to his dry and weedy flower borders. "My poor garden is nearly burnt up. Mamma Barbançon has been too busy to attend to it; besides, my illness seems to have put her all out of sorts. I suggested asking the porter to water the flowers every day or two; but you should have heard how she answered me. 'Bring strangers into the house to steal and destroy everything!' You know what a temper the good woman has, and I dared not insist, so you can see what a terrible condition my poor flowers are in."

"Never mind, uncle; I am back now, and I will act as your head gardener," said Olivier, gaily. "I have thought of it before, and if I had not been obliged to go out early this morning on business, you would have found your garden all weeded, and fresh as a rose sparkling with dew when you woke this morning. But tomorrow morning,—well, you shall see!"

The commander was about to thank Olivier when Madame Barbançon opened the door and asked if M. Gerald could come in.

"I should say he could come in!" exclaimed the old naval officer, gaily, as Olivier advanced to meet his friend.

"Thank heaven! his master mason has returned him to us at last," exclaimed the veteran, pointing to Olivier.

"Hopeless chaos seemed to reign in the worthy man's estimates," replied Olivier, "and when they were at last adjusted, the manager of the property, struck by my fine handwriting and symmetrical figures, asked me to straighten out some accounts of his, and I consented. But now I think of it, do you know, Gerald, who owns the magnificent château in which I spent the last two months?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, the Marquise of Carabas."

MATRIMONIAL INTENTIONS DISCLOSED.

“ What Marquise of Carabas ?”

“ The enormously wealthy heiress you were talking to us about before I went away.”

“ Mlle. de Beaumesnil ?” exclaimed Gerald, in profound astonishment.

“ The same. This magnificent estate belongs to her and yields her a yearly income of twenty thousand livres ; and it seems that she has dozens of such properties.”

“ What the devil can one do with so much money ?” exclaimed the veteran.

“ It is certainly a strange coincidence,” murmured Gerald, thoughtfully.

“ And why ?”

“ Because there is a possibility of my marrying Mlle. de Beaumesnil.”

“ Indeed, M. Gerald,” said the veteran, artlessly, “ so a desire to marry has seized you since I saw you last ?”

“ So you are in love with Mlle. de Beaumesnil ?” asked Olivier, no less naïvely.

Gerald, surprised at these questions, replied, after a moment of reflection :

“ It is perfectly natural that you should speak in this way, commander, and you, too, Olivier ; and among all the persons I know you are the only ones. Yes, for if I had said to a thousand other people, ‘ It is proposed that I should marry the richest heiress in France,’ each and every one of them would have replied without a thought about anything else : ‘ Yes, marry her by all means. It is a splendid match ; marry her, by all means ! ’ ”

Then, after another pause, Gerald added :

“ Of course it is only right, but how rare, oh, how rare ! ”

“ Upon my word, I had no idea that I was saying anything remarkable, M. Gerald. Olivier thinks exactly as I do, don’t you, my boy ? ”

“ Yes, uncle. But what is the matter with you, Gerald ? Why do you seem so serious all of a sudden ? ”

"I will tell you," said the young duke, whose features did, indeed, wear an unusually thoughtful expression. "I came here this morning to inform you of my matrimonial intentions,—you, commander, and you, Olivier, for I regard you both as sincere and devoted friends."

"You certainly have no truer ones, M. Gerald," said the veteran, earnestly.

"I am certain of that, commander, and this knowledge made me doubly anxious to confide my projects to you."

"That is very natural," replied Olivier, "for you know so well that whatever interests you interests us."

"The real state of the case is this," said Gerald, replying to his friend's words by a friendly gesture. "Yesterday, my mother, dazzled by Mlle. de Beaumesnil's wealth, proposed to me that I should marry that young lady. My mother considered my success certain, if I would consent to follow her counsels. But remembering the pleasures of my bachelor life and of independence, I at first refused."

"But if you have no liking for married life, the millions upon millions should not induce you to change this determination," remarked the old naval officer, kindly.

"But wait, commander," said Gerald, with some little embarrassment. "My refusal irritated my mother. She told me I was blind, and that I had no sense; but finally her anger gave place to such profound chagrin that, seeing her inconsolable at my refusal, I —"

"You consented to the marriage?" asked Olivier.

"Yes," replied Gerald.

Then noticing a slight movement of astonishment on the part of the old sailor, Gerald added:

"Commander, my decision seems to surprise you."

"Yes, M. Gerald."

"But why? Tell me frankly."

"Well, M. Gerald, if you consent to marry contrary to your inclination, and that merely to please your mother, I fear you are making a great mistake," an-

MATRIMONIAL INTENTIONS DISCLOSED.

swwered the veteran, in firm, but affectionate tones, "for sooner or later your wife will suffer for the compulsion you exert upon yourself to-day, and one ought not to marry to make a woman unhappy. Don't you agree with me, Olivier?"

"Perfectly."

"But how could I bear to see my mother weep, my mother who seems to have set her heart upon this marriage?"

"But think of seeing your wife weep, M. Gerald. Your mother has your affection to console her, while your wife, poor orphan that she is, who will console her? No one, or perhaps she will do as so many other women do,—console herself with lovers who are inferior to you in every way. They will torment her, they will disgrace her, perhaps,—another chance of misery for the poor creature!"

The young duke's head drooped, and he answered not a word.

"You asked us to be frank with you, M. Gerald," continued the commander, "and we are, because we love you sincerely."

"I did not doubt that you would be perfectly frank with me, so I ought to be equally so, and say in my defence that in consenting to this marriage I was influenced by another and not altogether ungenerous sentiment. You remember that I spoke of Macreuse, the other day, Olivier?"

"That miserable wretch who put little birds' eyes out with pins!" cried the veteran, upon whom this incident had evidently made a deep impression, "that hypocrite who is now a hanger-on of the clergy?"

"The same, commander. Well, he is one of the aspirants for Mlle. de Beaumesnil's hand."

"Macreuse!" exclaimed Olivier. "Poor girl, but he has no chance of success, has he?"

"My mother says not, but I fear that he has; for the

Church supports Macreuse's claims, and the Church is very powerful."

"Such a scoundrel as that succeed!" cried the old officer. "It would be shameful!"

"And it was because I was so indignant at the idea that, already touched by my mother's disappointment, I consented to the marriage partly in order to circumvent that wretch, Macreuse."

"But afterwards, M. Gerald, you reflected, did you not, that an honourable man like yourself does not marry merely to please his mother and circumvent a rival, even if that rival is a Macreuse?"

"What, commander!" exclaimed Gerald, evidently much surprised. "Do you think it would be better to allow this wretch to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, when he wants her only for her money?"

"Nothing of the kind," answered the veteran, warmly. "One should always prevent a crime when one can, and if I were in your place, M. Gerald —"

"What would you do, commander?"

"I would go first to M. Macreuse, and say to him: 'You are a scoundrel, and as scoundrels should not be allowed to marry women to make them miserable all their lives, I forbid you to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and I will prevent you from marrying her; I do not know her, I have no intention of marrying her myself, but I take an interest in her because she is in some danger of becoming your wife. As that, in my opinion, would be infinitely worse for her than if she were going to be bitten by a mad dog, I intend to warn her that you are worse than a mad dog.'"

"That would be doing exactly right, uncle, exactly!" cried Olivier.

But Gerald motioned him not to interrupt the veteran, who continued:

"I should then go straight to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and say to her: 'My dear young lady, there is a certain

MATRIMONIAL INTENTIONS DISCLOSED.

M. Macreuse who wants to marry you for your money. He is a vile cur, and I will prove it to his face whenever and wherever you like. Take my advice ; it is entirely disinterested, for I haven't the slightest idea of marrying you myself, but honest men should always put unsuspecting persons on their guard against scoundrels.' I tell you, M. Gerald, my way may be unconventional, but there might be very much worse ones."

"The course my uncle suggests, though rather rough, certainly has the merit of being eminently straightforward, you must admit, my dear Gerald," said Olivier, smilingly ; "but you, who are so much better versed in the ways of the world than either of us are, probably know whether you could not achieve the same result by less violent means."

But Gerald, more and more impressed by the veteran's frankness and good sense, had listened to him very respectfully.

"Thanks, commander," he exclaimed, offering him his hand, "you and Olivier have prevented me from doing a dishonourable deed, for the danger was all the greater from the fact that I was investing it with a semblance of virtue. To make my mother the happiest of women, and prevent Mlle. de Beaumesnil from becoming the victim of a man like Macreuse, seemed a very fine thing to me at first. I was deceiving myself most abominably, for I not only gave no thought whatever to the future of this young girl whom I would probably make miserable for life, but I was yielding, though unconsciously, to the fascination of her colossal wealth."

"You are wrong about that, Gerald, I am sure."

"I am not, upon my word, Olivier. So, to save myself from further temptation, I shall return to my first resolution, viz., not to marry at all. I regret only one thing in this change of plans," added Gerald, with much feeling, "and that is the deep disappointment I shall cause

my mother, though she is sure to approve my course eventually."

"But listen, Gerald," interrupted Olivier; "you should not do wrong merely to please your mother, as uncle says. Yet a mother is so kind, and it grieves one so much to see her unhappy, why should you not try to satisfy her without the sacrifice of your convictions as an honest and honourable man?"

"Good, my boy!" exclaimed the veteran. "But how is that to be done?"

"Explain, Olivier."

"You have no wish to marry, you say?"

"Not the slightest."

"And you have never seen Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Never."

"Then you cannot love her, of course, that is evident. But who knows but you might fall in love with her if you did see her? A bachelor life is your idea of perfect happiness now, I admit. But is it not quite possible that Mlle. de Beaumesnil might inspire you with a taste for married life instead?"

"You are right, Olivier," exclaimed the veteran. "You ought to see the young lady before you refuse, M. Gerald, and perhaps, as Olivier says, the desire to marry may seize you."

"Impossible, commander!" cried Gerald, gaily. "One is born a husband as one is born a poet or a cripple, and then there is another objection,—the most important of all,—that occurs to me now. It is that the young lady in question is the richest heiress in France."

"And what of that?" urged Olivier. "What difference does that make?"

"It makes a great deal of difference," replied Gerald, "for even if I was obliged to admit that Mlle. de Beaumesnil pleased me infinitely,—that I was dead in love with her, in fact, and that she shared my love,—the fact remains that she is the possessor of a princely fortune,

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while I have nothing ; for my paltry twelve thousand a year would be but a drop in the ocean of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's millions. It would be too humiliating to a man's pride, would it not, commander, to marry a woman to whom you can give nothing, but who gives you everything ? Besides, however sincere your love may be, don't you have the appearance of marrying for mercenary motives ? Don't you know that everybody would say : 'Mlle. de Beaumesnil wanted to be a duchess. Gerald de Senneterre hadn't a penny, so he sold her his name and title, and threw himself in.' "

On hearing these words, the uncle glanced at his nephew with a decidedly embarrassed air.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COMMANDER'S ADVICE.

GERALD did not fail to notice this fact, and it was with a smile that he exclaimed :

“ Yes, I was sure of it, commander. There is something so humiliating to an honest man’s pride in such a glaring inequality of fortune that you are as unpleasantly impressed by it as I am. Your silence proves that conclusively.”

“ The fact is,” replied the veteran, after a moment’s silence,—“ the fact is, I really can’t explain why such a state of things would appear perfectly natural and right to me if it was the man who possessed the fortune, and the lady had nothing.”

Then the old officer added, with a good-natured smile :

“ You think me a great simpleton, I expect, M. Gerald.”

“ Quite the contrary. Your thought owes its origin to the most profound delicacy of feeling, commander,” answered Gerald. “ It is the most natural thing in the world that a penniless, but charming young girl, accomplished and endowed with noble attributes of mind and heart, should marry an immensely rich man,—if their love be mutual,—but for a man who has nothing, to marry a woman who has everything — ”

“ Ah, uncle, and you, too, Gerald,” exclaimed Olivier, interrupting his friend, “ you are both entirely wrong about this matter.”

“ And why, if you please ?”

THE COMMANDER'S ADVICE.

" You admit, and so do I, that a penniless young girl is quite justified in marrying an immensely rich man, but this is only on condition that she loves the man sincerely."

" Of course ! " said Gerald. " If she is actuated by mercenary motives, it becomes nothing more nor less than a business transaction."

" And disgraceful accordingly," added the old sailor.

" Very well, then," continued Olivier, " why should a poor man,— because, Gerald, you are poor in comparison with Mlle. de Beaumesnil,— why, then, I ask, should you be censured for marrying that young lady if you love her sincerely in spite of her millions,— in short, if you love her as sincerely as if she were without name and without fortune ? "

" That is true, M. Gerald," chimed in the commander ; " if one loves as an honest man should love, if one is certain that he loves not the money, but the woman, one's conscience is clear. What right can any one have to reproach him ? In short, I advise you to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil first, and decide afterwards."

" Yes, that will, I believe, be best," Gerald replied. " That will decide everything. Ah, I was wise to come and talk over my plans with you, commander, and with you, Olivier."

" Nonsense, M. Gerald, as if, in the refined circles in which you move, there were not plenty of persons who would have said the same things Olivier and I have just said to you."

" Ah, don't you believe it," responded Gerald, shrugging his shoulders.

Then, more gravely, he added :

" It is the same in the middle classes, if not worse. Everybody cares only for money."

" But why the devil is it that Olivier and I are so superior to all the rest of the world, M. Gerald ? " asked the commander, laughing.

“ Why ? ” repeated Gerald, with much feeling. “ It is because you, commander, have led for forty years the hard, rough, dangerous, unselfish life of a sailor ; it is because while you were leading this life you acquired the Christian virtues of resignation and contentment with little ; it is because, ignorant of the cowardly concessions of society in these matters, you consider a man who marries for money as dishonourable as a man who cheats at cards, or shirks his duty on the battle-field. Am I not right, commander ? ”

“ But you see it all seems so very plain to me, M. Gerald, that — ”

“ Oh, yes, very plain to you and to Olivier, who has led, like me, though for a much longer time, the life of a soldier,— a life that teaches one unselfishness and brotherly feeling. Is this not true ? ”

“ My brave, kind-hearted Gerald ! ” cried the young soldier, as deeply moved as his friend. “ But you must admit that, though the life of a soldier may have developed your natural generosity, it certainly did not endow you with that virtue. You, alone, perhaps, of all the young men in your rank of life, were capable of realising the sort of cowardice one manifested in sending some poor devil to the wars to be killed in your place,— you, alone, too, seem to feel some scruples with regard to a marriage that all the others would gladly contract at any cost.”

“ You are not going to begin to pay me compliments at this late day, I hope,” laughed Gerald. “ Very well, then, it is decided that I am to see Mlle. de Beaumesnil, and leave the rest to fate. My course is marked out for me. I will not deviate from it, I promise you.”

“ Bravo, my dear Gerald,” replied Olivier, gaily. “ I see you now in my mind’s eye in love, married,— a happy Benedict, in short. Ah, well, there’s no happiness like it, I’m sure. And alas ! I, yesterday, knowing nothing of your plans, asked Madame Herbaut’s permis-

THE COMMANDER'S ADVICE.

sion to introduce to her a former comrade, a very worthy young man, whom she instantly accepted on the strength of my all-potent recommendation."

" You don't say so," exclaimed Gerald, laughing. " Oh, well, you needn't consider me as good as dead and buried. I shall promptly avail myself of her kind permission to call, I assure you."

" You will?"

" Most assuredly I shall."

" But your matrimonial projects?"

" Why, they make me all the more determined on this point."

" Explain, I beg of you."

" Why, the explanation is very simple, it seems to me. The more reason I have to love a bachelor's life, the better I shall have to love Mlle. de Beaumesnil in order to renounce my pleasures, and consequently the more certain I shall be of the sentiment she inspires. So, once for all, let it be understood that you are to take me with you to Madame Herbaut's, and to make me still stronger — to resist temptation, of course, I'll become the lover of one of the rivals, or even of one of the satellites of that famous duchess who is such a bugbear to me, and with whom I strongly suspect you of being in love."

" Nonsense, Gerald!"

" Come, be frank with me. You surely can't suspect me of desire to cut you out. As if there were not plenty of duchesses in the world! Do you remember the sutler's pretty wife? You had only to say the word, and I, forthwith, left the coast clear for you."

" What, another!" cried the commander. " What a fascinating rascal my nephew must be!"

" Ah, commander, if you knew the number of hearts the scamp won in Algiers alone! Madame Herbaut's fair guests had better be on their guard if they don't want to fall victims to Olivier's fascinations!"

"I haven't any designs on the charming guests, you big simpleton," retorted Olivier, gaily. "But seriously, do you really wish me to take you to Madame Herbaut's?"

"Certainly I do," answered Gerald. Then turning to the veteran, he continued :

"You really must not consider me a harebrained fellow on account of this determination on my part, commander. I have accepted your friendly advice in regard to marriage, you say, and yet I end the conversation by begging Olivier to take me to Madame Herbaut's. Ah, well, strange as this may appear to you, commander, I say, no longer jestingly, but in all seriousness this time, that the less change I make in my habits, the more sincere my love for Mlle. de Beaumesnil will have to be to induce me to abandon them."

"Upon my word, M. Gerald, I must confess that your reasons seemed decidedly odd to me at first," replied the veteran, "but, on reflection, I find them quite sensible. There would, perhaps, be a sort of hypocritical pre-meditation in breaking off in advance with a life you have led so long."

"Come then, Olivier, and introduce me to Madame Herbaut's charming tribe," exclaimed Gerald, gaily. "Good-bye, commander, I shall return soon and often. What else can you expect? You can't hope to act as my father confessor without more or less trouble, you know."

"You'll find me a pretty exacting mentor as regards absolution and matters of conscience, I warn you," retorted the old sailor, gaily. "You must drop in again soon, for you are to keep me posted about the progress of your matrimonial schemes, you recollect."

"Of course. It is my bounden duty to tell you all now, commander, and I shall not fail to do it. But now I think of it, I must report with regard to a commission you entrusted to me, M. Bernard. Will you allow me a word with your uncle in private, Olivier?"

THE COMMANDER'S ADVICE.

"Most assuredly," answered the young soldier, promptly leaving the room.

"I have some good news for you, commander," said Gerald, in a low tone. "Thanks partly to my own efforts, and especially to the Marquis de Maillefort's recommendation, Olivier's appointment as a second lieutenant is almost certain."

"Is it possible, M. Gerald!"

"There is very little doubt of it, I think, for it is very generally known that the Marquis de Maillefort is being strongly urged to become a deputy, and this fact has increased his influence very much."

"Ah, M. Gerald, how can I express my gratitude — "

"I must hasten to rejoin Olivier, my dear commander," said Gerald, to escape the veteran's thanks. "His suspicions are sure to be aroused by a longer conversation."

"So you have a secret with my uncle," cried Olivier, as soon as his friend rejoined him.

"Oh, yes, you know I'm a man of mysteries; and, by the way, before we adjourn to Madame Herbaut's, I have another and very mysterious favour to ask of you."

"Let me hear it."

"You know all about this neighbourhood. Can't you recommend some quiet lodgings in a retired street hereabouts?"

"What! You are thinking of deserting the Faubourg St. Germain for the Batignolles? How delightful!"

"Nonsense! Listen to me. Of course, living in my mother's house I cannot receive my friends indiscriminately, — you understand."

"Very well."

"So I have had some rooms elsewhere, but the house has changed hands, and the new owner is such a strictly moral man that he has warned me that I have got to leave when my month is up, — that is, day after tomorrow."

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“All the better. It is a very fortunate thing, I think. You’re about to marry, so bid farewell to your amours.”

“Olivier, you have heard my ideas on the subject. Your uncle approves them. I am resolved to change none of my bachelor habits in advance, and if I should abandon the idea of marriage altogether, think of my desolate situation, homeless and loveless! No, no, I am much too cautious and far-sighted not to—to preserve a pear to quench my thirst.”

“You’re a man of infinite precautions, certainly. Very well, as I go and come I’ll look at the notices of rooms to rent in the windows.”

“Two little rooms, with a private hall, is all I need. I’ll look myself when we leave Madame Herbaut’s, for time presses. Day after to-morrow is the fatal day. Say, Olivier, wouldn’t it be strange if I should discover what I need right here? Do you remember the lines:

“‘What if in this same quiet spot
I both sweet love and friendship true should find?’

“The lines seem to me a fit motto for a shepherd’s pipe; but what of that? Truth needs no ornamentation. But now on, on to the house of Madame Herbaut!”

“You still insist? Consider well.”

“Olivier, you are really intolerable. I’ll go alone if you won’t accompany me.”

“Come, then, the die is cast. It is understood that you are simply Gerald Senneterre, a former comrade of mine.”

“Senneterre? No; that would be too imprudent. You had better call me Gerald Auvernay, for I am adorned with the marquisate of Auvernay, my dear Olivier, though you may not be aware of the fact.”

“You are M. Gerald Auvernay, then; that is decided. But the devil!”

“What’s the matter now?”

THE COMMANDER'S ADVICE.

"But what else are you going to be?"

"What else am I going to be?"

"Yes; what is to be your occupation?"

"Why, a bachelor of the new school."

"Pshaw! I can't introduce you to Madame Herbaut as a young man who is living on the income of the money he saved while in the army. Besides, Madame Herbaut receives, no idlers. You would excite her suspicions at once, for the worthy woman strongly distrusts young men who have nothing to do but court pretty girls, for you'll find that her girls are pretty."

"All this is certainly very amusing. Well, what do you want me to be?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Let me see," said Gerald, laughing. "How would you like me to be an apothecary?"

"That would do very well, I should think."

"Oh, no, I was only joking; that wouldn't answer at all."

"But there are some very nice and gentlemanly apothecaries, I assure you, Gerald."

"But really I shouldn't dare to look any one of those pretty girls in the face."

"Let's try to think of something else, then. What do you say to being the clerk of a notary? How does that suit you?"

"Admirably. My mother has an interminable law-suit on hand, and I drop in to see her notary and lawyer occasionally, so I can study the part from nature."

"Very well, follow me, then, and I will introduce you as Gerald Auvernay, clerk to a notary."

"Chief clerk to a notary," corrected Gerald, with great emphasis.

"Come on, ambitious youth!"

Gerald, thanks to Olivier's recommendation, was received by Madame Herbaut with great cordiality.

On the afternoon of that same day grim M. Bouffard

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called for the rent Commander Bernard owed him. Madame Barbançon paid him, overcoming with great difficulty her strong desire to disfigure the ferocious landlord's face with her nails.

Unfortunately, the money thus obtained, instead of appeasing M. Bouffard's greed, seemed to imbue him with increased energy to collect his dues, and persuaded that, but for his persistent dunning and abuse, Madame Barbançon would not have paid him, he hastened off to the Rue Monceau where Herminie lived, resolved to treat the poor girl with increased severity, and thus secure the payment of the rent she owed him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ABODE OF THE DUCHESS.

HERMINIE lived on the Rue de Monceau in one of the numerous dwellings of which M. Bouffard was the owner. She occupied a room on the ground floor, reached by a small hallway opening under the archway of the porte-cochère. The two windows looked out upon a pretty garden, enclosed on one side by an evergreen hedge, and on the other by a tall lattice that separated it from the adjoining street.

This garden really pertained to a much larger apartment on the ground floor, an apartment which, together with another suite of rooms on the third floor, was unoccupied,—an unpleasant state of things, which considerably increased M. Bouffard's ill-humour towards his delinquent tenants.

Nothing could have been simpler, yet in better taste, than this abode of the duchess.

A cheap but exceedingly fresh and pretty chintz covered the walls and rather low ceiling of the room. In the daytime full draperies of the same material concealed a large alcove in which the bed stood, as well as two glass doors near it, one of which opened into a tiny dressing-room, and the other into the hall, a sort of antechamber about eight feet square.

Chintz curtains, lined with pink, veiled the windows, which were also decorated with pretty white muslin sash curtains, tied back with pink ribbons. A carpet, with a white ground, with small bouquets of pink roses

dropped here and there,—this carpet had been the most expensive item in Herminie's furnishing,—covered the floor. The mantel drapery, beautifully embroidered by Herminie herself, was pale blue, with garlands of roses and jonquils. Two candlesticks of exquisite Pompeian design stood, one on either side of a white marble clock, surmounted by a statuette of Joan of Arc, while at each end of the mantel stood two tall vases of *grès verni*, a wonderful invention, by the way. These vases, which were of the purest Etruscan form, held big bunches of fresh roses, which filled the room with their delicious fragrance.

These modest mantel decorations, being all of the cheapest materials, were of slight intrinsic value, having cost not more than fifty or sixty francs, but from an artistic point of view they were irreproachable.

Opposite the fireplace stood Herminie's piano, her bread-winner. Between the two windows was a table, which also served as a bookcase, the duchess having arranged several works by her favourite authors upon it, as well as a few books which she had received as prizes during her school-days.

Here and there upon the wall, in plain pine frames, so highly polished that they looked like citron wood, hung a few well-chosen engravings, among them "Mignon Pining for Her Native Land," and "Mignon Longing for Heaven," both by Scheffer, hanging one on either side of Francesca da Rimini, by the same artist.

In two corners of the room small *étagères* held several plaster statuettes, reduced copies of famous antiques. A small rosewood cabinet, bought for a song from some second-hand furniture dealer in the Batignolles, two pretty tapestry-covered chairs,—Herminie's handiwork,—and a large armchair of green satin decorated with beautiful silk embroidery in brilliant hues, representing flowers and birds, completed the furniture of the room.

By means of industry and intelligence, combined with

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exquisite taste, Herminie had been able to create for herself this elegant and refined home at comparatively little expense.

Culinary duties or details may have been distasteful to this fastidious duchess. At all events, she had managed to escape that difficulty through the good offices of the portress, who, for a trifling compensation, brought her a glass of milk every morning, and in the evening a plate of excellent soup, accompanied with a dish of vegetables and some fruit,— a frugal repast rendered appetising enough by the exquisite daintiness of Herminie's dinner-table ; for though the duchess possessed only two cups and half a dozen plates, they were of fine china, and when the girl had placed on her round table, covered with a napkin of dazzling whiteness, her carafe, her cut-glass tumbler, her two shining silver forks and spoons, and her pretty china plate decorated with tiny pink roses and forget-me-nots, the simplest food seemed wonderfully appetising.

But alas ! to Herminie's intense chagrin, her silver spoons and forks, and her watch, the only really valuable article she possessed, were now in pawn at the *mont de piété*, where she had been obliged to send them by the portress, the poor girl having no other means of defraying the daily expenses of her illness, and of obtaining a small sum of money upon which she could live until she was able to resume the lessons interrupted by her illness, for a period of nearly two months.

This long delay was the cause of Herminie's extreme poverty and consequent inability to pay the one hundred and eighty francs she owed M. Bouffard for rent.

One hundred and eighty francs !

And the poor child possessed only about fifteen francs upon which she would have to live for nearly a month !

It is evident, therefore, that the foot of a man had never crossed Herminie's threshold.

The duchess, free and untrammeled in every way,

had never loved,— though she had inspired love in the hearts of many, without intending or even caring to do so, for she was too proud to stoop to coquetry, and too generous to enjoy the torments of an unrequited love. None of her suitors had pleased Herminie, in spite of the honesty of their matrimonial overtures, based in some cases, at least, upon a certain amount of affluence, for several had been engaged in business, while others were musicians like Herminie herself, and others clerks in dry-goods establishments, or bookkeepers.

The duchess could not fail to display, in her choice of a husband, the refined taste and exquisite delicacy which were her most prominent characteristics ; but it is needless to say that the social position of the man she loved, whether high or low, would not have influenced her in the least.

She knew by herself, and she gloried in the knowledge, that rare nobility and refinement of soul are sometimes found in the poorest and most obscure, and that which had oftenest offended her in her suitors were the slight imperfections, not apparent very possibly to any one save the duchess, but inexpressibly obnoxious to her.

This suitor had been too boisterous in manner ; that one, too familiar and unrefined ; this one had a rasping voice ; that one was almost grotesque in appearance. Nevertheless, some of the rejected suitors possessed many admirable qualities of mind and heart, as Herminie herself had been the first to admit. These she considered the best and most worthy men in the world, and frankly granted them her esteem, and even her friendship, but not her love.

It was not from any feeling of disdain or foolish ambition that Herminie had refused them, but simply, as she herself had said to the unfortunates, “because she felt no love for them, and was resolved to remain single all her life rather than marry without experiencing a sincere and profound love.” And yet, by reason of this

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very pride, fastidiousness, and sensitiveness, Herminie must have suffered much more than the generality of persons from the painful and almost inevitable annoyances inherent to the position of a young girl who is not only obliged to live alone, but who is also exposed to the unfortunate conditions which may result at any time from a lack of employment or from sickness.

For some time, alas! the duchess had been realising most cruelly the unhappy consequences of her poverty and isolation. Any person who understands Herminie's character and her pride,—a pride that had impelled the young girl, in spite of her pressing need, to proudly return the five hundred franc note sent her by the executors of the Beaumesnil estate,—can readily understand the mingled terror and dismay with which the poor child was awaiting the return of M. Bouffard, for, as he had remarked to Madame Barbançon, he intended to pay his last round of visits to his delinquent tenants that afternoon.

Herminie was trying to devise some means of satisfying this coarse and insolent man, but, having already pawned her silver and her watch, she had nothing more to pawn. No one would have loaned her twenty francs on her mantel ornaments, tasteful as they were, and her pictures and statuettes would have brought little or nothing.

Overcome with terror at the thought of her truly pitiable condition, Herminie was weeping bitterly and shuddering in the dread expectation of hearing M. Bouffard's imperious peal of the bell at any moment.

Yet so noble and generous was this young girl's nature that, even in the midst of these cruel perplexities, Herminie never once thought of saying to herself that she might be saved by an infinitesimal portion of the enormous superabundance belonging to the sister whose sumptuous apartments she had seen a couple of days before. If the duchess thought of her sister at all,

it was that she might find in the hope of seeing her some diversion from her present grief and chagrin. And for this sorrow and chagrin Herminie now blamed herself as she cast a tearful glance around her pretty room, reproaching herself the while for her unwarranted expenditures.

She ought to have saved up this money for a rainy day, she said to herself, and for such misfortunes as sickness or a lack of pupils. She ought to have resigned herself to taking a room on the fourth floor, next door to strangers, to living separated from them only by a thin partition, in a bare and desolate room with dirty walls. She ought not to have allowed herself to be tempted by this outlook upon a pretty garden, and by the seclusion of her present apartments. She ought to have kept her money, too, instead of spending it on the pretty trifles which had been the only companions of her solitude, and which had converted the little room into a delightful retreat where she had lived so happily, confident of her ability to support herself.

Who ever would have supposed that a person as proud as she was would have to submit to the coarse, but just abuse of a man to whom she owed money,—money that she could not pay?

Could anything be more humiliating?

But these severe though just reproaches for past delinquencies did not ameliorate her present misery in the least; and she remained seated in her armchair, her eyes swollen with weeping, now absorbed in a gloomy reverie, now starting violently at the slightest sound, fearing that it presaged the arrival of M. Bouffard.

At last the agonising suspense was ended by a violent pull of the bell.

“It is he,” murmured the poor creature, trembling in every limb. “I am lost!” she moaned.

And she remained seated in her chair, absolutely paralysed with fear.

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A second peal of the bell, even more violent than the first, resounded in the tiny hall.

Herminie dried her eyes, summoned up all her courage, and, pale and trembling, went to open the door.

She had not been deceived.

It was M. Bouffard.

This glorious representative of the nation had laid aside the uniform of a citizen soldier and donned a gray sack coat.

"Well, have you my money ready?" he demanded, roughly, planting himself on the threshold of the door the girl had opened for him with such an unsteady hand.

"But, monsieur —"

"Do you intend to pay me, yes or no?" exclaimed M. Bouffard, in such a loud voice that the question was overheard by two other persons.

One was then standing under the porte-cochère. The other was mounting the staircase which started close to the entrance to Herminie's apartments.

"I ask you for the last time, will you pay me? Answer me, yes or no!" repeated M. Bouffard, in even louder and more threatening tones.

"In pity do not speak so loud," said Herminie, in imploring accents. "I assure you that, though I cannot pay you, it is not my fault; indeed it is not."

"I am in my own house, and I will talk as I please. If any one overhears me so much the better. It may serve as a lesson to other tenants who may want to get out of paying their rent just like you."

"Step inside, monsieur, I beseech you," pleaded Herminie, clasping her hands, imploringly; "and I will explain."

"Explain — explain what?" retorted M. Bouffard, following the girl into her room. "There's no explanation possible. The whole affair is very simple. Are you going to pay me, — yes, or no?"

"It is impossible, unfortunately, just at this time,"

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said Herminie, dashing away a tear, "but if you will have the great kindness to wait —"

"Always the same old story!" sneered M. Bouffard, shrugging his shoulders.

Then glancing around the room with a sardonic air, he added :

"This is a pretty state of things! Here is a tenant who declares she cannot pay her rent, and yet indulges in fine carpets, chintz hangings, and all sorts of knick-knacks. If it isn't enough to make a man swear! I, who own seven houses in the city of Paris, have a carpet only in my drawing-room, and Madame Bouffard's boudoir is hung with a fifteen sous paper; and yet, here is a young woman who gives herself the airs of a princess, though she hasn't a penny."

Herminie, driven to desperation, lifted her head proudly, and, in a manner that was both firm and dignified, said :

"This piano is worth at least four times the amount of my indebtedness, monsieur. Send for it whenever you please. It is the only article of value I possess. Dispose of it; sell it whenever you like."

"Am I a dealer in pianos? How do I know what I should realise from the sale of your instrument? You must pay me my rent in money, and not in pianos."

"But good heavens, monsieur! I have no money. I offer you my piano, though I earn my living by it. What more can I do?"

"I won't accept anything of the kind. You have money, I know it. You sent a watch and some silver, too, to the pawnbroker's, for it was my portress who took them there for you. You can't humbug me, you see."

"Alas! monsieur, the paltry sum they loaned me I have been obliged to spend for —"

But Herminie did not finish the sentence. She had just perceived a gentleman standing in the open door-

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way. It was M. de Maillefort, and he had been an unobserved witness of the painful scene for several minutes.

Noting the girl's sudden start, and the surprised glance she was directing towards the door, M. Bouffard turned his head, and, seeing the hunchback, seemed quite as astonished as Herminie.

The marquis now advanced, and, bowing respectfully to Herminie, said :

" I beg a thousand pardons for thus intruding, mademoiselle, but I found the door open, and as I hope you will do me the honour to grant me a few moments' conversation on a very important matter, I ventured to enter."

After these words, which were uttered with as much courtesy as deference, the marquis turned to M. Bouffard and surveyed him from head to foot with such an expression of withering contempt that the ex-grocer became not only embarrassed, but thoroughly intimidated as well, in the presence of this hunchback, who said to him, coldly :

" I came, monsieur, to solicit the honour of a few minutes' conversation with this young lady."

" Oh — ah ! Well, what is that to me ?" grunted M. Bouffard, gradually regaining his assurance.

The marquis, without paying the slightest attention to M. Bouffard, and addressing Herminie, who was becoming more and more astonished, asked, deferentially :

" Will mademoiselle do me the favour to grant me the interview I ask ?"

" But, monsieur," replied the girl, much embarrassed, " I do not know — I am not sure — "

" I must take the liberty of remarking that, as it is absolutely necessary that our conversation should be strictly confidential, it is indispensable that this — this gentleman should leave us, unless there may still be something you wish to say to him. In that case, I will retire."

" I have nothing further to say to monsieur," an-

swwered Herminie, pleased at the idea of escaping from her present painful position, even for a few moments.

"Mademoiselle has nothing more to say to you, monsieur," said the marquis to M. Bouffard, with a meaning gesture.

But the ex-grocer, who was now himself again, and who was consequently furious at the thought that he had allowed himself to be awed by the hunchback, exclaimed :

"So you fancy a man can be turned out of his own house without paying him his just dues, monsieur, and all because you support this—"

"Enough, monsieur, enough!" cried the marquis, hastily interrupting Bouffard.

And even as he spoke, he seized the offepder by the arm with such violence that the ex-grocer, feeling the long, bony fingers of the hunchback hold him as in a vise, gazed at him with mingled fear and astonishment.

But the marquis, still smiling in the most amiable manner, continued with marvellous affability :

"I regret that I am unable to enjoy your delightful society any longer, my dear sir, but you see I am at mademoiselle's orders, and as she is good enough to grant me a few minutes, I must not abuse her kindness."

As he spoke, the marquis half led, half dragged M. Bouffard to the door, and that worthy, astonished to encounter such physical vigour and such an authoritative manner in a hunchback, offered no further resistance.

"I will go, as I have some other matters to attend to in the house," he exclaimed, making the best of the situation. "I am going up-stairs for awhile, but I shall return after you leave. I intend to have my money then, if I don't—"

The marquis bowed ironically, closed the door in the ex-grocer's face, and then returned to Herminie.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SACRED MISSION.

M. DE MAILLEFORT, much impressed by what Madame de la Rochaiguë had told him about the young musician who had been so unjustly treated, as she averred, by Madame de Beaumesnil, had again questioned Madame Dupont, a confidential attendant of the deceased countess.

This examination, which the marquis had conducted with great prudence and skill, revealed many new details concerning the relations which had existed between the countess and that young girl, and though Madame Dupont seemed to have no suspicion of the truth, M. de Maillefort felt almost certain that Herminie must be Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

In spite of this firm conviction on his part, the marquis resolved to approach Herminie with the greatest reserve, not only because any revelation of his suspicions would dishonour Madame de Beaumesnil's memory, but, also, because the countess had never revealed her secret to M. de Maillefort, who had mistrusted rather than discovered it.

Herminie, utterly unable to imagine the object of this stranger's visit, was standing by the mantel, pale and agitated when the marquis returned to her side after M. Bouffard's summary expulsion.

A single quick glance around the abode of the duchess had satisfied the marquis of the perfect order, refined taste, and exquisite neatness of the girl's home, and this, together with what Madame de la Rochaiguë had told

him of her noble disinterestedness, gave him a very high opinion of Herminie, and, almost sure that he saw in her the person he was so anxious to find, he studied her charming features in the hope of discovering a resemblance to Madame de Beaumesnil, and fancied that he had succeeded.

Though she did not exactly resemble her mother, Herminie, like Madame de Beaumesnil, was a blonde. Like her, she had blue eyes, and though the contour of the two faces was not alike, there was certainly a family likeness that could not fail to strike a close observer like M. de Maillefort; so it was with an emotion that he found it difficult to conceal that he approached Herminie, who was becoming more and more embarrassed by the long silence, and by the searching though almost affectionate gaze of her strange visitor.

"Mademoiselle," he said, at last, in an almost fatherly tone, "I must beg you to excuse my delay, but I experience a sort of embarrassment in expressing the great interest I feel in you."

M. de Maillefort's voice, as he uttered these words, was so full of feeling that the young girl looked at him wonderingly, then, more and more surprised, she ventured, timidly :

"But this interest, monsieur — "

"You cannot imagine what has aroused it. Very well, I will tell you, my dear child,—for let me call you that," the hunchback continued, as if in answer to a hasty movement on the part of Herminie; "my age and the interest I feel in you certainly give me a right to call you my dear child, if you will permit such a familiarity."

"It might serve to prove my gratitude for the kind and consoling words you have just uttered, monsieur, though the humiliating position in which you just saw me placed — "

"Oh, do not trouble yourself in the least about that," interrupted the marquis, "I — "

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"I am not trying to justify myself," said Herminie, proudly, interrupting the marquis in her turn. "I have nothing to blush for, and though, for some inexplicable reason, you are kind enough to evince an interest in me, it is only my duty to tell you, or to try to prove to you, that it was neither mismanagement, extravagance, nor idleness that placed me in such a humiliating position for the first time in my life. Ill for nearly two months past, I have been unable to give lessons as usual. I resumed them only a few days ago, so I have been obliged to spend the small amount of money I had saved. This is the truth, monsieur. If I am a little in debt, it is only in consequence of my illness."

"Strange," thought the marquis, mentally comparing the date of the countess's death with that of the beginning of Herminie's illness, "it was about the time of Madame de Beaumesnil's death that this poor child must have been taken ill. Can grief have been the cause?"

And in tones of touching sympathy, the marquis asked aloud :

"And was this attack of illness severe, my dear child? You were overworked, perhaps."

Herminie blushed deeply. Her embarrassment was great, for she felt that it would be necessary to utter an untruth to conceal the real cause of her illness, and it was with considerable hesitation that she finally replied :

"I think I must have been overfatigued, monsieur, for the attack was followed by a sort of mental prostration, but now, thank Heaven, I am well again."

The girl's embarrassment and hesitation did not escape the marquis, who had already noted the expression of profound melancholy on Herminie's features.

"There isn't the slightest doubt of it," he mentally exclaimed. "She became ill with grief after Madame de Beaumesnil's death. She knows, then, that the countess was her mother. But in that case, why didn't the countess, in the frequent opportunities she must have

had to be alone with her daughter, give her this money she entrusted to me ?”

A prey to these perplexities, the hunchback, after another silence, said to Herminie :

“ My dear child, I came here with the intention of maintaining the utmost reserve. Distrusting my own judgment, and greatly in doubt as to the course I ought to pursue, I had resolved to approach the subject that brought me here with infinite caution, for it is a delicate, yes, a sacred mission, that I have to fulfil.”

“ What do you mean, monsieur ?”

“ Will you be kind enough to listen to me, my dear child. What I have heard about you, and what I have just seen, or rather divined, perhaps,— in short, the confidence you inspire,— had changed this determination on my part, and I am going to talk to you freely and frankly, sure that I am speaking to an honest, true-hearted woman. You know Madame de Beaumesnil,— you loved her —”

Herminie could not repress a movement of astonishment, mingled with anxiety.

“ Yes, I know,” continued the hunchback. “ You loved Madame de Beaumesnil devotedly. Your grief at her death was the sole cause of your illness.”

“ Monsieur,” cried Herminie, terrified to see her secret, or rather that of her mother, almost at the mercy of a stranger, “ I do not know what you mean. I conceived for Madame de Beaumesnil, during the brief time we were together, the respectful affection she deserved. Like all who knew her, I deeply deplored her death, but —”

“ It is only right and natural that you should answer me thus, my dear child,” said the marquis, interrupting Herminie. “ You cannot have much confidence in me, not knowing who I am, not knowing even my name. I am M. de Maillefort.”

“ M. de Maillefort !” exclaimed the young girl, remem-

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bering that she had written a letter addressed to the marquis for her mother.

“ You have heard my name before, then ! ”

“ Yes, monsieur. Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil, not feeling strong enough to write herself, asked me to do it in her stead, and the letter you received on the night of her death — ”

“ Was written by you ? ”

“ Yes, monsieur.”

“ Then you must feel, my dear child, that you owe me your entire confidence. Madame de Beaumesnil had no more devoted friend than myself, — and it was upon the strength of this friendship of more than thirty years’ standing, that she felt she could rely upon me sufficiently to entrust me with a sacred mission.”

“ Can he mean that my mother confided the secret of my birth to him ? ” thought Herminie.

The marquis, noticing Herminie’s increasing agitation, and confident that he had at last found Madame de Beaumesnil’s illegitimate daughter, continued :

“ The letter you wrote for Madame de Beaumesnil requested me to come to her even at that late hour of the night. You remember this fact, do you not ? ”

“ Yes, monsieur.”

“ I obeyed the summons as soon as I received it. The countess felt that her end was fast approaching,” continued the hunchback, in a voice that trembled with suppressed emotion. “ After commanding her daughter Ernestine to my care, Madame de Beaumesnil implored me to — to do her a last service. She entreated me to — to divide my care and interest between her daughter and — and another young girl no less dear to her — ”

“ He knows all,” Herminie said to herself, with a sinking heart. “ My poor mother’s sin is no secret to him.”

“ This other young girl,” continued the hunchback, more and more overcome, “ was an angel, the countess told

me. Yes, those were her very words,—an angel of virtue and courage, a brave and noble-hearted girl,” added the marquis, his eyes wet with tears. “A poor, lonely orphan, who, though destitute alike of friends and resources, had struggled bravely on against a most adverse fate. Ah, if you could have heard the accents of despairing tenderness in which that most unhappy woman and unfortunate mother spoke of that young girl; for I divined — though she made no such admission, deterred, doubtless, by the shame of such an avowal — that only a mother could speak thus and suffer thus on thinking of her daughter’s fate. No, no, it was not a stranger that the countess commended to my care with so much earnestness on her death-bed.”

The marquis, overcome by emotion, paused an instant and wiped his tear-dimmed eyes.

“Oh, my mother,” Herminie said to herself, making a brave effort at self-control, “then your last thoughts were indeed of your unhappy daughter!”

“I made the dying woman a solemn promise that I would fulfil her last request, and divide my solicitude between Ernestine de Beaumesnil and the young girl the countess implored me so earnestly to protect. Then she gave me this purse,” continued the hunchback, drawing it from his pocket, “which contains, she assured me, a small competence which she charged me to deliver to the young girl whose future would thus be assured. But, unfortunately, Madame de Beaumesnil breathed her last without having told me the orphan’s name.”

“Thank Heaven! He only has his suspicions, then!” Herminie said to herself, rapturously. “I shall not have to bear the anguish of seeing a stranger know my mother’s fault. Her memory will remain untarnished.”

“You can judge of my anxiety and chagrin, my dear child,” continued the marquis. “How was I to comply with Madame de Beaumesnil’s last request, ignorant of the young girl’s name? Nevertheless, I began my search,

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and, at last, after many fruitless attempts, I have found that orphan girl, beautiful, courageous, generous, as her poor mother said, and that girl is — is you — my child — my dear child,” cried the hunchback, seizing both Herminie’s hands.

Then, in a transport of joy and ineffable tenderness, he exclaimed :

“ You see I have indeed the right to call you my child. No, never was there any father prouder of his daughter ! ”

“ Monsieur,” answered Herminie, in a voice she tried hard to make calm and firm, “ though it costs me a great deal to destroy this illusion on your part, it is my duty to do it.”

“ What ! ” cried the hunchback.

“ I am not the person you are seeking, monsieur,” replied Herminie, firmly.

The marquis recoiled a step or two and gazed at the young girl without being able to utter a word.

To resist the influence of the revelation M. de Maillefort had just made to her, Herminie needed a heroic courage born of all that was purest and noblest in her character,— filial pride.

The young girl’s heart revolted at the mere thought of confessing her mother’s disgrace to a stranger by acknowledging herself to be Madame de Beaumesnil’s daughter.

For what right had Herminie to confirm this stranger’s suspicions by revealing a secret the countess herself had been unwilling to confess to her most devoted friend, a secret, too, which her mother had had the strength to conceal from her when clasped to her bosom, her child’s heart-throbs mingled with her own.

While these generous thoughts were passing swiftly through Herminie’s mind, the marquis, astounded by this refusal on the part of a young girl whose identity he could not doubt, tried in vain to discover the reason of this strange determination on her part.

At last he said to Herminie :

“ Some motive, which it is impossible for me to fathom, prevents you from telling me the truth, my dear child. This motive, whatever it may be, is certainly noble and generous ; then, why conceal it from me, your mother’s friend, a friend who feels that he is obeying your mother’s last wishes in coming to you ? ”

“ This conversation is as painful to me as it is to you, M. le marquis,” Herminie replied, sadly, “ for it brings to mind a person who treated me with the greatest kindness during the brief time I was called upon to minister to her as a musician, and in no other capacity, I give you my word. I think that this declaration should be sufficient, and that you should spare me further entreaties on this subject. I repeat that I am not the person you are seeking.”

On hearing this assurance again repeated, some of M. de Maillefort’s doubts returned ; but unwilling to abandon all hope, he exclaimed :

“ No, no, I cannot be mistaken. Never shall I forget Madame de Beaumesnil’s anxiety, nor her prayers for — ”

“ Permit me to interrupt you, M. le marquis, and to say to you that, under the painful influence of a scene that must have been particularly trying to you, you doubtless mistook the nature of the interest Madame de Beaumesnil felt in the orphan of whom you speak. To defend Madame de Beaumesnil’s memory against such a mistake, I have no other right than that of gratitude, but the respectful regard I and every one else felt for Madame la comtesse convinces me that this is an error on your part.”

This manner of looking at the matter accorded too well with M. de Maillefort’s own secret hopes for him to turn an entirely deaf ear to this argument. Still, remembering the terrible anguish of the countess when she commended the orphan to his protection, he said :

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"This much is certain: no one would speak in such terms of a stranger."

"How do you know that, M. le marquis?" retorted Herminie, gaining ground inch by inch. "I have heard many instances cited of Madame de Beaumesnil's boundless generosity. Her affection for some persons she assisted was, I have heard, as great as that she manifested for the orphan she asked you to protect, and as this girl, you say, is as deserving as she is unfortunate, it seems to me a sufficient explanation of the great interest the countess took in her. Possibly, too, she felt her protection to be a duty. Possibly some friend had confided the girl to Madame de Beaumesnil's care, as that lady in turn confided her to yours."

"But in that case, why should she have laid such stress upon concealing the name of the donor from the person to whom I was to deliver this money?"

"Because Madame de Beaumesnil, in this case, perhaps, as in many others, wished to conceal her benevolence."

And Herminie having now entirely recovered her coolness and composure, presented these arguments with such readiness that the marquis at last began to think that he had been deceived, and that he had suspected Madame de Beaumesnil unjustly.

Then a new idea occurred to him, and he exclaimed:

"But even admitting that the merit and the misfortunes of this orphan are her only claim, do not these conditions seem especially applicable in your own case? Why should it not be you the countess meant?" he asked.

"I knew Madame de Beaumesnil too short a time for me to deserve any such mark of her bounty, M. le marquis; besides, as the countess did not designate me by name, how can I,—I appeal to your own delicacy of feeling,—how can I accept a large sum of money on the mere supposition that it may have been intended for me?"

"All that would be very true if you did not deserve the gift."

"And in what way have I deserved it, M. le marquis?"

"By your attentions to the countess, and the alleviation of suffering she secured through you. Why is it at all unlikely that she should have desired to compensate you as she did others?"

"I do not understand you, monsieur."

"The will of the countess contained several legacies. You seem to be the only person who was forgotten, in fact."

"I had no right to expect any bequest, M. le marquis. I was paid for my services."

"By Madame de Beaumesnil?"

"By Madame de Beaumesnil," answered Herminie, firmly.

"Yes, you said as much to Madame de la Rochaiguë on so nobly returning—"

"Money that did not belong to me, M. le marquis, that is all."

"No!" exclaimed M. de Maillefort, his former convictions suddenly regaining the ascendancy. "No, I was not mistaken,—instinct, reason, conviction, all tell me that you are—"

"M. le marquis," said Herminie, interrupting the hunchback, for she was anxious to put an end to this painful scene, "one word more, and only one. You were Madame de Beaumesnil's most valued friend, for on her death-bed she entrusted her daughter to your care. Would she not also have told you in that supreme moment if she had another child?"

"Great Heaven, no!" exclaimed the marquis, involuntarily. "The unhappy woman would have shrunk from the shame of such an avowal."

"Yes, I am sure of that," thought Herminie, bitterly. "And is it I who will make the disgraceful confession from which my poor mother shrank?"

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The conversation was here interrupted by M. Bouffard's entrance. The emotion of the marquis and of the young girl was so great that they had not noticed the opening of the hall door.

The once ferocious landlord seemed to be in a very different mood. Something must have appeased his wrath, for his coarse and brutal manner had vanished, and his rubicund visage was wreathed with a crafty smile.

"What do you want?" demanded the marquis, curtly.
"What are you doing here?"

"I came to make my excuses to mademoiselle."

"Your excuses?" said the young girl, greatly surprised.

"Yes, mademoiselle, and I wish to make them before monsieur, as I reproached you for not paying me in his presence, so I now declare before him,—I swear it in the presence of God and man,—I swear that I have been paid all that mademoiselle owed me."

"You have been paid!" cried Herminie, in amazement; "and by whom, monsieur?"

"Oh, you know very well, mademoiselle," responded M. Bouffard, with the same coarse laugh. "You know very well! What a sly one you are!"

"I have no idea what you mean, monsieur," said Herminie, indignantly.

"Bah!" cried M. Bouffard, shrugging his shoulders, "I suppose you're not going to try to make me believe that handsome young men pay the rent for pretty blondes merely for the love of God!"

"Some one has paid my rent for me, monsieur?" demanded Herminie, blushing scarlet.

"Yes, some one has paid it, and in shining yellow gold," replied M. Bouffard, drawing several gleaming coins from his pocket and tossing them up in the air. "Look at the yellow boys, ain't they pretty, eh?"

"And this gold, monsieur," said Herminie, unable to

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believe her own ears,—“this gold— who gave it to you ?”

“Oh, don’t try to play innocent, my dear. The person who paid me is a handsome fellow, tall, and dark complexioned, with a brown moustache. That description would answer for his passport, if he wanted one.”

The marquis had listened to M. Bouffard first with surprise, and then with utter dismay.

This young girl, in whom he had taken so deep an interest, had suddenly become hateful in his eyes; so coldly bowing to Herminie, he walked silently to the door, with an expression of bitter disappointment on his face.

“Ah,” he thought, “still another lost illusion !”

“Remain, monsieur,” cried the young girl, running after him, all of a tremble, and overcome with shame, “I entreat you—I implore you to remain !”

CHAPTER XXIX.

HUMILIATION AND CONSOLATION.

ON hearing Herminie's appeal, M. de Maillefort turned and asked, coldly and sternly :

“ What do you want, mademoiselle ? ”

“ What do I want, monsieur ? ” the girl exclaimed, her cheeks on fire, her eyes sparkling with tears of wounded pride and indignation. “ What I want is to tell this man in your presence that he lies.”

“ I ? ” snorted M. Bouffard, indignantly. “ Really, this is a little too much, when I have the yellow boys right here in my pocket.”

“ But I tell you that you lie ! ” cried the girl, advancing towards him, with a commanding gesture. “ I have given no one the right to pay you, or to make me the victim of such an insult.”

In spite of the coarseness of his nature, M. Bouffard was not a little impressed by this display of fiery indignation, so retreating a step or two, the owner of the house stammered by way of excuse :

“ But I swear to you, mademoiselle, upon my sacred word of honour, that, as I was going up-stairs a few minutes ago, I was stopped on the first landing by a handsome, dark-complexioned young man who gave me this gold to pay your rent. I'm telling you the honest truth ; upon my word I am ! ”

“ Oh, my God, to be humiliated and insulted like this ! ” cried the young girl, her long repressed sobs bursting forth at last.

After a moment, turning to the hunchback, a silent witness of the scene, Herminie said, in entreating tones, her beautiful face bathed with tears :

“ Oh, in pity, do not believe that I have merited this insult, M. le marquis.”

“ A marquis ! ” muttered M. Bouffard, hastily removing his hat, which he had kept upon his head up to that time.

M. de Maillefort, turning to Herminie, his face beaming as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his heart, took her by the hand as a father might have done, and said :

“ I believe you, I believe you, my dear child ! Do not stoop to justify yourself. Your tears, and the evident sincerity of your words, as well as your just indignation, all satisfy me that you are speaking the truth, and that this insulting liberty was taken without your knowledge or consent.”

“ I am certainly willing to say this much,” said M. Bouffard, “ though I’ve been in the habit of coming to the house almost every day, I never saw this young man before. But why do you feel so badly about it, my dear young lady ? Your rent is paid, and you may as well make the best of it. There are plenty of other people who would like to be humiliated in the same way. Ha, ha, ha ! ” added M. Bouffard, with his coarse laugh.

“ But you will not keep this money, monsieur ? ” cried Herminie. “ I beg you will not ; sell my piano,—my bed,—anything I possess, but in pity return this money to the person who gave it to you. If you keep it, the shame is mine, monsieur ! ”

“ How you do go on ! ” exclaimed M. Bouffard. “ I didn’t feel insulted in the least in pocketing my rent. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, you know. Besides, where am I likely to find this handsome young man to return him his money ? He is a stranger to me. I haven’t the slightest idea who he is or where he came

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from ; but it can easily be arranged. When you see the fellow you can tell him that it was against your wishes that I kept his money, but that I am a regular old Shylock and all that. Put all the blame on me, I don't mind ; I've got a thick hide."

" Mademoiselle," said M. de Maillefort, addressing Herminie, who, with her face buried in her hands, was silently weeping, " will you consent to take my advice ? "

" What would you have me do, monsieur ? "

" Accept from me, who am old enough to be your father,—from me, who was the devoted friend of a person for whom you had as much respect as affection,—accept from me a loan sufficient to pay this gentleman. Each month you can pay me in small instalments. As for the money monsieur has already received, why, he must do his best to find the stranger who gave it to him. If he fails, he must give the money to some local charity."

Herminie listened to this proposal with the liveliest gratitude.

" Oh, thank you, thank you, M. le marquis," she exclaimed. " I accept your kind offer gladly, and am proud to be under obligations to you."

" But I utterly refuse to be a party to any such arrangement," exclaimed M. Bouffard.

" And why, monsieur ? " demanded the marquis.

" I will not,—I will not, I tell you. It sha'n't be said that — in short, I'm not such a monster that — but no matter, let it be understood, once for all, that the marquis is to keep his money. I'll try to find that young coxcomb ; if I don't, I'll drop his money in the poor-box. I won't sell your piano, mademoiselle, but I'll be paid, all the same. What do you say to that ? "

" Have the goodness to explain, monsieur, if you please," said the marquis.

" Well, this is the long and short of it," answered M. Bouffard. " My daughter Cornelia has a music teacher,

quite a famous teacher, I believe,—a M. Tonnerriliuskoff—”

“With such a name one ought certainly to make a noise in the world,” said the marquis.

“And on the piano, too, M. le marquis. He’s a six-footer, with a big, black moustache, and hands as big as — as shoulders of mutton. But this famous teacher costs like the devil,—fifteen francs a lesson, to say nothing of the repairs to the piano, which he almost hammers to pieces, he is so strong. Now if mademoiselle here would give Cornelia lessons at five—no, say four francs a lesson, and three lessons a week,—that would make twelve francs a week,—she could soon pay me what she owes me, and afterwards could pay her entire rent that way.”

“Bravo, M. Bouffard!” cried the marquis.

“Well, what do you think of my proposition, mademoiselle?”

“I accept it most gratefully, and thank you with all my heart for this chance to free myself of my obligations to you in such an easy way. I assure you that I will do everything possible to further your daughter’s progress.”

“Oh, that will be all right, I’m sure. It is understood, is it? Three lessons a week, at four francs a lesson, beginning day after to-morrow. That will be twelve francs a week,—better call it ten, I guess,—it’s easier to calculate. Ten francs a week makes forty francs a month,—quite a snug little sum.”

“Any terms you choose to name will suit me, monsieur. I accept them gratefully.”

“Ah, well, my dear sir,” said the marquis, turning to M. Bouffard, “aren’t you much better satisfied with yourself now than you were awhile ago, when you were frightening this poor child nearly to death by your threats?”

“That’s a fact, monsieur,—that’s a fact, for this young lady is certainly deserving. Then, too, I shall get rid of that odious music master, with his big, black

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moustache and fifteen franc lessons. Besides, he is always having his big hands on Cornelie's hands to show her the fingering, he says, and I don't like it."

"My dear M. Bouffard," said the marquis, taking the ex-grocer a little aside, "will you allow me to give you a word of advice?"

"Why certainly, M. le marquis."

"Never give masters to a young girl or a young woman, because sometimes, you see, there is a change of rôles."

"A change of rôles, M. le marquis?" repeated M. Bouffard, wonderingly.

"Yes; not unfrequently the scholar becomes the mistress,—the mistress of the master. Understand?"

"The mistress of the master? Oh, yes, very good! I understand perfectly. That is good; very good, indeed! Ha, ha, ha!"

Then, suddenly becoming serious, he added:

"But now I think of it, if that Hercule de Tonnerriuskoff undertakes—"

"Mlle. Bouffard's virtue must be above suspicion, my dear sir; still, it might be safer—"

"The brigand shall never set foot in my house again. Thanks for your counsel, M. le marquis."

Then, returning to Herminie, M. Bouffard added:

"So we will begin day after to-morrow at two o'clock; that is Cornelie's hour."

"At two o'clock, then. I will be punctual, I promise you."

"And at ten francs a week?"

"Yes, monsieur, and even less, if you say so."

"Would you come for eight?"

"Yes," answered Herminie, smiling, in spite of herself.

"We'll say eight francs, then."

"Come, come, M. Bouffard, a wealthy real estate owner like you shouldn't stoop to any such haggling,"

the marquis interposed. "What! an elector,—perhaps even an officer in the National Guard,—for you seem to me quite equal to such a position—"

M. Bouffard straightened himself up proudly, and, making a military salute, responded:

"A second lieutenant in the first company of the second regiment of the first batallion, M. le marquis."

"All the more reason that you should uphold the dignity of your rank, dear M. Bouffard," replied M. de Maillefort.

"That is true, M. le marquis. I said ten francs, and ten francs it shall be. I always honour my signature. I will go and try to find that young coxcomb. He may be hanging around somewhere outside the house now. I'll ask Mother Moufflon, the portress, if she knows anything about him, and tell her to watch out for him. Your servant, M. le marquis. I'll see you again, day after to-morrow, mademoiselle."

Then, turning again, just as he reached the door, he said to Herminie:

"Mademoiselle, an idea has just occurred to me. You see I'd like to convince the marquis here that Bouffard is not such a bad fellow, after all."

"Let us hear the idea, M. Bouffard," said the hunch-back.

"You see that little garden out there, M. le marquis?"

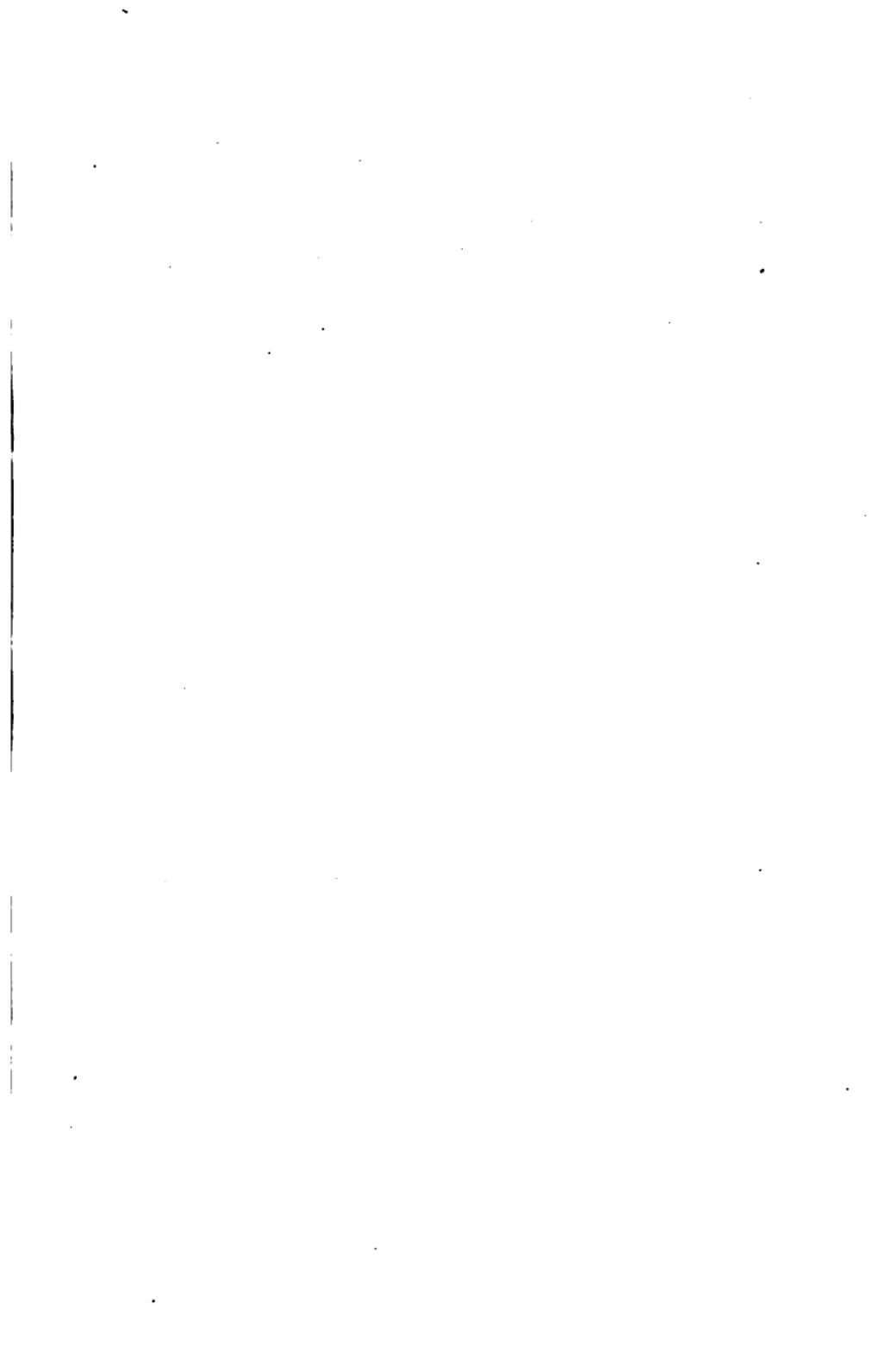
"Yes."

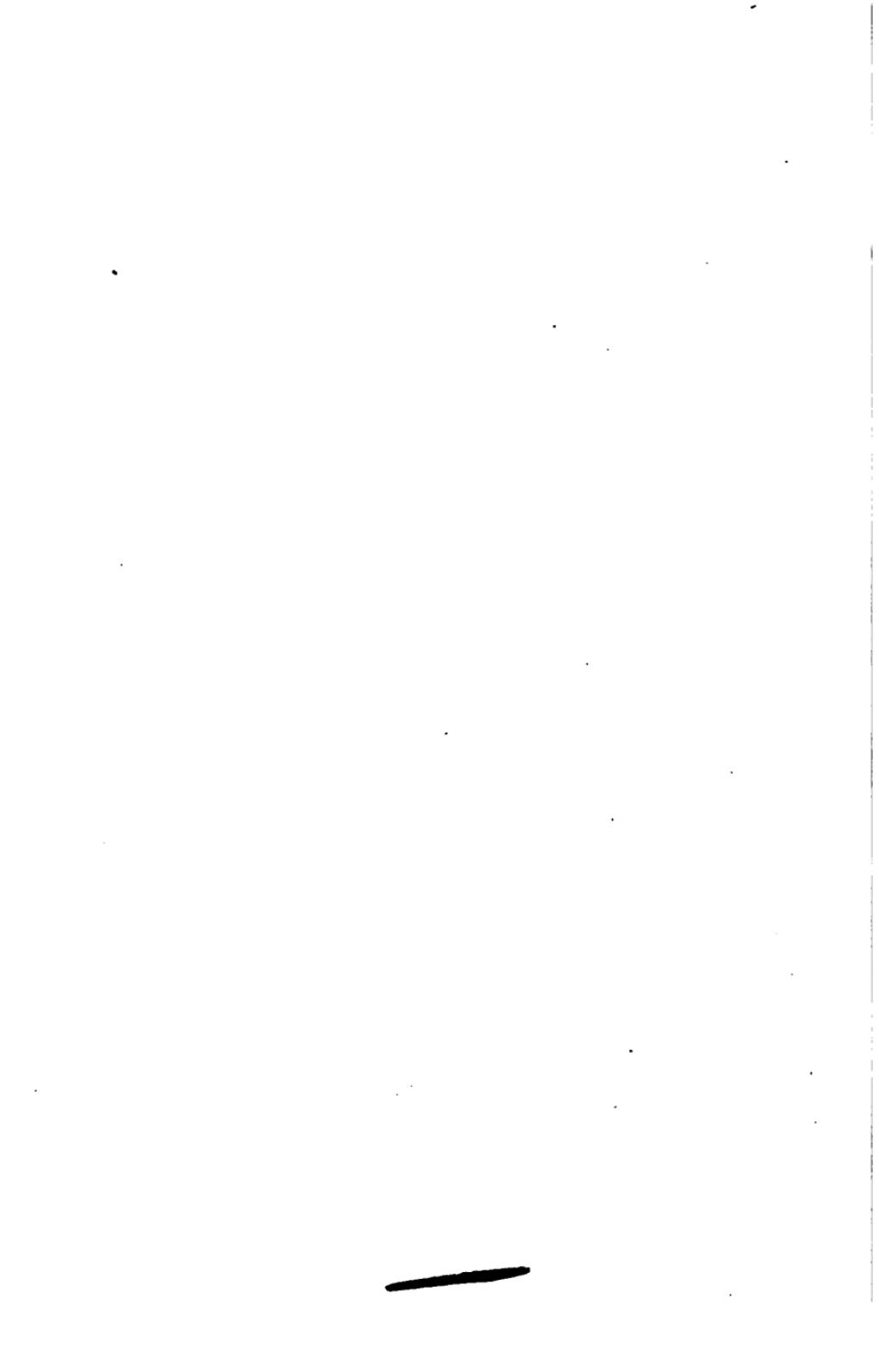
"It belongs to the large apartment on this floor. Ah, well, I intend to allow mademoiselle the use of this garden — until the other apartment is rented, at least."

"Do you really?" cried Herminie, overjoyed. "Oh, I thank you so much. What pleasure it will give me to walk about in that pretty garden!"

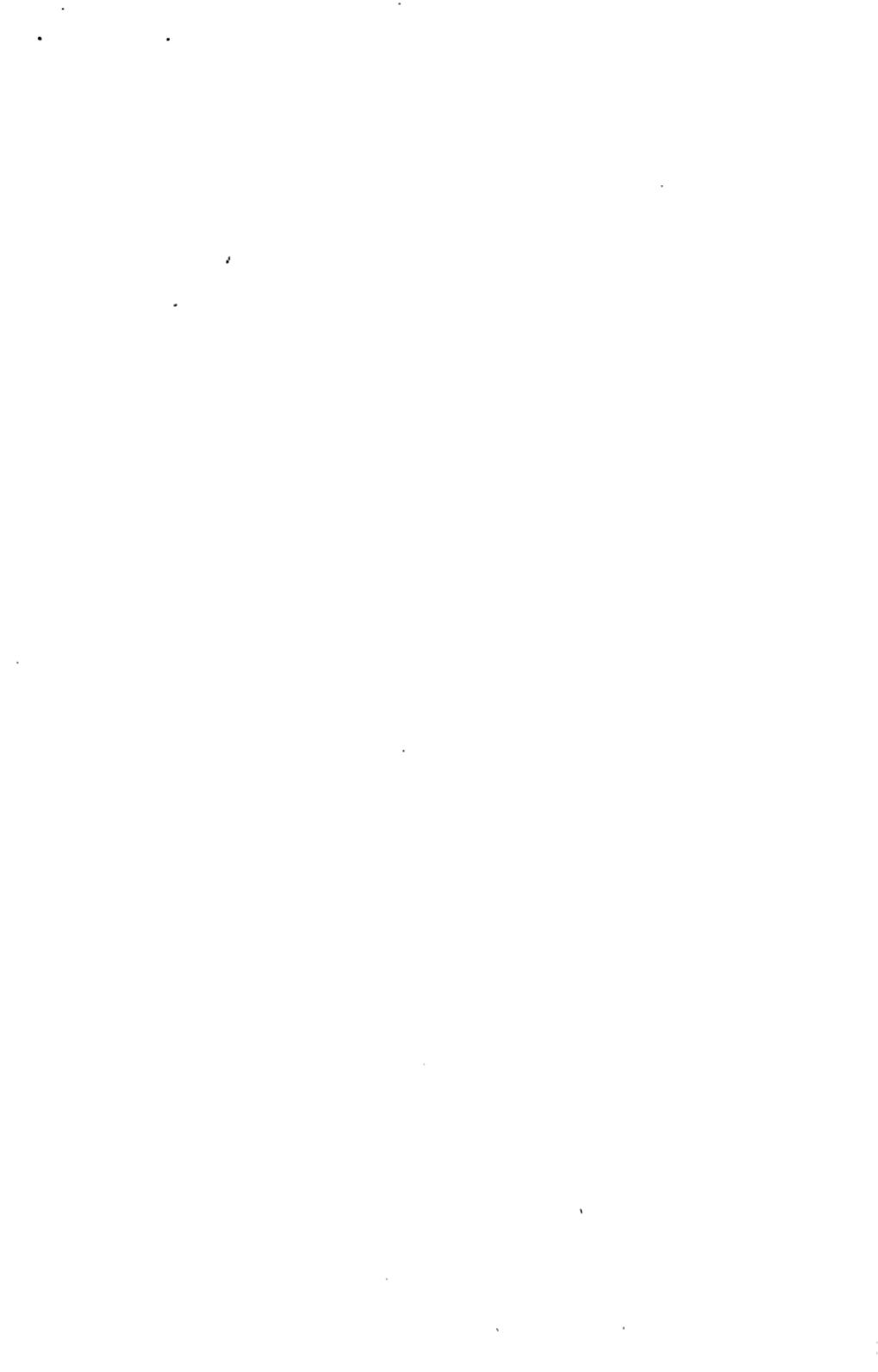
But M. Bouffard had already fled, as if his natural modesty forbade his listening to the protestations of gratitude such a generous offer must inspire.

"One has no idea what it costs such people as that









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to be generous and obliging," remarked the hunchback, laughing.

Then becoming serious again, he said : " My dear child, what I have just seen and heard gives me such a clear understanding of the nobility of your heart and the firmness of your character, that I realise the futility of any renewed efforts in relation to the matter that brought me here. If I am mistaken, if you are not Madame de Beaumesnil's daughter, you will naturally persist in your denial ; if, on the contrary, I have divined the truth, you will still persist in denying it, actuated, I am sure, by some secret but honourable motive. I shall insist no further. One word more : I have been deeply touched by the feeling that prompted you to defend Madame de Beaumesnil's memory against suspicions which may be entirely without foundation. If you were not so proud, I should tell you that your disinterestedness is all the more noble from the fact that your situation is so precarious ; and, by the way, let me say right here that, though M. Bouffard has deprived me of the pleasure of being of service to you this time, I want you to promise me, my dear child, that in future you will apply only to me."

" And to whom else could I apply without humiliation, M. le marquis ? "

" Thank you, my dear child, but no more, M. le marquis, I beg. In our recent grave conversation I had no time to protest against this ceremonious appellation ; but now we are old friends, no more M. le marquis, I beseech you. That is agreed, is it not ? " asked the hunchback, cordially offering his hand to the young girl, who pressed it gratefully as she exclaimed :

" Ah, monsieur, such kindness and such generous confidence more than consoles me for the humiliation I suffered in your presence."

" Dismiss that from your mind entirely, my dear child. The insult you received only proves that the

insolent stranger is as foolish as he is coarse. It is doing him entirely too much honour to retain a lasting remembrance of his offence."

" You are right, monsieur," replied Herminie, though she still blushed deeply with wounded pride and indignation ; " contempt, the most profound contempt is all that such an insult merits."

" Undoubtedly ; but, unfortunately, your loneliness and unprotected condition are probably to a great extent accountable for this unwarranted presumption on the part of a stranger, my poor child, so, as you permit me to talk in all sincerity, why have you never thought of boarding with some respectable elderly woman, instead of living alone ? "

" I have thought of doing that more than once, but it is difficult to find the right person — that is when one is as *exigeante* as I am," she added, smiling.

" You admit that you are very *exigeante*, then ? " asked the marquis, also smiling.

" Really I cannot help it, it seems to me, monsieur ; could I find such surroundings as these in the home of a person whose means are as modest as mine ? Besides, I ought not to say it, perhaps, but I am so keenly sensitive to certain faults of education and manner that I should positively suffer at times. It is silly and ridiculous, I know, for lack of breeding does not lessen the virtue and kindness of most of the people of the class to which I belong, but to which my education has rendered me somewhat superior. Still it is intensely repugnant to me, and I consequently prefer to live alone, in spite of the many inconveniences of such an isolated position. Another objection is that I should be under an obligation to any person who would receive me into her family, and I fear that I might be made to feel this obligation too much."

" All this is very natural," said the hunchback, after a moment's reflection. " It would scarcely be possible

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for one of your proud nature to act or feel otherwise, and this pride, which I admire so much in you, has been, and I am sure always will be, your best safeguard. But this will not prevent me, with your permission, of course, from coming now and then to see if I can serve you in any way."

"Can you doubt the pleasure, the very great pleasure it will give me to see you?"

"I will not so wrong you as to doubt it, my dear child."

Seeing M. de Maillefort rise to take leave, Herminie felt strongly tempted to make some inquiry concerning Ernestine de Beaumesnil, whom he had probably seen ere this; but the young girl feared she might betray herself and arouse M. de Maillefort's suspicions by speaking of her sister.

"Farewell, my dear child," said the marquis, rising. "I came here in the hope of finding a daughter to love and protect, and I shall not return with an empty heart. And now again, farewell — and *au revoir*."

"And soon, I hope, M. le marquis," responded Herminie, with respectful deference.

"Nonsense!" said the hunchback, smiling. "There is no marquis here, but an old man who loves you, — yes, loves you with all his heart. Don't forget that."

"Oh, I shall never forget it, monsieur."

"Good, that promise atones for everything. Once more *au revoir*, my child."

And M. de Maillefort departed, still in doubt as to Herminie's identity, and no less in doubt in regard to the best means of carrying out Madame de Beaumesnil's last wishes.

The young girl, left alone, reflected long upon the incidents of the day, which, after all, had proved a happy one for her, for by refusing a gift which proved her mother's deep solicitude for her welfare, but which might

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The young girl, left alone, reflected long upon the incidents of the day, which, after all, had proved a happy one for her, for by refusing a gift which proved her mother's deep solicitude for her welfare, but which might

insolent stranger is as foolish as he is coarse. It is doing him entirely too much honour to retain a lasting remembrance of his offence."

" You are right, monsieur," replied Herminie, though she still blushed deeply with wounded pride and indignation ; " contempt, the most profound contempt is all that such an insult merits."

" Undoubtedly ; but, unfortunately, your loneliness and unprotected condition are probably to a great extent accountable for this unwarranted presumption on the part of a stranger, my poor child, so, as you permit me to talk in all sincerity, why have you never thought of boarding with some respectable elderly woman, instead of living alone ? "

" I have thought of doing that more than once, but it is difficult to find the right person — that is when one is as *exigeante* as I am," she added, smiling.

" You admit that you are very *exigeante*, then ? " asked the marquis, also smiling.

" Really I cannot help it, it seems to me, monsieur ; could I find such surroundings as these in the home of a person whose means are as modest as mine ? Besides, I ought not to say it, perhaps, but I am so keenly sensitive to certain faults of education and manner that I should positively suffer at times. It is silly and ridiculous, I know, for lack of breeding does not lessen the virtue and kindness of most of the people of the class to which I belong, but to which my education has rendered me somewhat superior. Still it is intensely repugnant to me, and I consequently prefer to live alone, in spite of the many inconveniences of such an isolated position. Another objection is that I should be under an obligation to any person who would receive me into her family, and I fear that I might be made to feel this obligation too much."

" All this is very natural," said the hunchback, after a moment's reflection. " It would scarcely be possible

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for one of your proud nature to act or feel otherwise, and this pride, which I admire so much in you, has been, and I am sure always will be, your best safeguard. But this will not prevent me, with your permission, of course, from coming now and then to see if I can serve you in any way."

"Can you doubt the pleasure, the very great pleasure it will give me to see you?"

"I will not so wrong you as to doubt it, my dear child."

Seeing M. de Maillefort rise to take leave, Herminie felt strongly tempted to make some inquiry concerning Ernestine de Beaumesnil, whom he had probably seen ere this; but the young girl feared she might betray herself and arouse M. de Maillefort's suspicions by speaking of her sister.

"Farewell, my dear child," said the marquis, rising. "I came here in the hope of finding a daughter to love and protect, and I shall not return with an empty heart. And now again, farewell — and *au revoir*."

"And soon, I hope, M. le marquis," responded Herminie, with respectful deference.

"Nonsense!" said the hunchback, smiling. "There is no marquis here, but an old man who loves you, — yes, loves you with all his heart. Don't forget that."

"Oh, I shall never forget it, monsieur."

"Good, that promise atones for everything. Once more *au revoir*, my child."

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compromise that mother's memory, the young girl had gained M. de Maillefort's warm friendship.

But the payment made to M. Bouffard by a stranger was a terrible blow to Herminie's pride.

"I must seem despicable, indeed, in the eyes of a person who dared to take such a liberty as that," the proud girl was saying to herself just as there came a timid ring at the door.

Herminie opened it to find herself confronted by M. Bouffard and a stranger.

This stranger was Gerald de Senneterre.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN APOLOGY ACCEPTED.

ON seeing the Duc de Senneterre, who was an entire stranger to her, Herminie coloured with surprise, and said to M. Bouffard, with much embarrassment :

“ I did not expect to have the pleasure of seeing you again so soon, monsieur.”

“ No more did I, mademoiselle. No more did I! It was this gentleman who forced me to return.”

“ But I do not know the gentleman,” Herminie answered, more and more astonished.

“ No; I have not the honour of being known to you, mademoiselle,” said Gerald, with an expression of the deepest anxiety on his handsome features, “ and yet, I have come to ask a favour of you. I beseech you not to refuse it.”

Gerald’s handsome face showed so much frankness, his emotion seemed so sincere, his voice was so earnest, his manner so respectful, and his appearance so elegant and *distingué*, that it never once occurred to Herminie that this could be the stranger she was so bitterly reproaching.

Besides, reassured by M. Bouffard’s presence, and unable to imagine what favour the stranger could have come to ask, the duchess, turning to her landlord, said, timidly :

“ Will you have the goodness to come in, monsieur ? ”

And as she spoke, she led the way into her own room.

The young duke had never seen a woman who compared with Herminie in beauty, and this beauty alike of

form and feature was greatly enhanced by the dignified modesty of her demeanour.

But when Gerald followed the girl into her room and saw the countless indications of refined habits and exquisite taste everywhere apparent, he felt more and more confused, and in his profound embarrassment he could not utter a word.

Amazed at the stranger's silence, Herminie turned inquiringly to M. Bouffard, who said :

"It will be best to begin at the beginning, my dear young lady. I will explain why this gentleman — "

"Allow me," said Gerald, interrupting M. Bouffard. Then, turning to Herminie, he continued, with a charming mixture of frankness and deference :

"I may as well confess that it is not a favour I have come to ask, but forgiveness."

"Of me, monsieur — and why?" asked Herminie, ingenuously.

"My dear mademoiselle," said M. Bouffard, with a meaning gesture, "this is the young man who paid me that money, you know. I met him just now, and — "

"It was you, monsieur?" cried Herminie, superb in her indignation. And looking Gerald full in the face, she repeated, witheringly :

"It was you?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, but listen, I beg of you."

"Enough, monsieur, enough!" said Herminie. "Such audacity seems inconceivable! You have at least the courage to insult, monsieur," added Herminie, with crushing contempt.

"But, mademoiselle, do not suppose for one moment—" pleaded Gerald.

"Monsieur," said the young girl, again interrupting him, but in a voice that trembled violently, for she could feel tears of grief and humiliation rising to her eyes, "I can only beg that you will leave my house. I am a woman,— and I am alone."

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These last words were uttered in such tones of intense sadness that Gerald was moved to tears in spite of himself, and when the young girl raised her head after a violent effort to conquer her emotion, she saw two big tears gleaming in the eyes of the stranger, who, after bowing low without a word, started towards the door.

But M. Bouffard, seizing Gerald by the arm, exclaimed :

" Why, stop a second ! You surely are not going like that ! "

And we must admit that M. Bouffard added mentally :

" And my little apartment on the third floor, am I to lose my chance of renting that ? "

" Monsieur," interposed Herminie, seeing her landlord attempt to detain the offender ; " monsieur, I must insist — "

" But, my dear young lady, you certainly ought to know why I brought this young man here," exclaimed M. Bouffard. " You surely cannot suppose that it was with the intention of annoying you. The fact is, I met the young fellow near the *barrière*, and as soon as I laid eyes on him, I called out, ' Ah, my generous youth, a nice scrape you got me into with your yellow boys. Here they are ; take them, and don't let me see any more of them, if you please.' And then I told him how you had felt about the service he had rendered you, and how you had cried and taken on, until monsieur turned red, and then pale, and then green, and finally said to me, apparently quite miserable about what I had told him, ' Ah, monsieur, I have unintentionally insulted a person whose unprotected position renders her all the more worthy of respect. I owe her an apology, and I will make it in your presence, as you were my involuntary accomplice. Come, monsieur, come.' Upon my word of honour, mademoiselle, these were the very words the young man said to me, and somehow what

he said touched me. I can't imagine what is the matter with me to-day, I'm as chicken-hearted as a woman. I thought he was right to want to come and apologise to you, so I brought him along, or, rather, he brought me along, for he took me by the arm and dragged me along at the double-quick. In fact, I never walked so fast in my life."

The sincerity of the words was unmistakable, and as Herminie was endowed with a keen sense of justice, and she had been not a little touched by the tears she had seen glittering in Gerald's eyes, she said to the stranger, in a tone which indicated a strong desire to end this painful scene as soon as possible :

"In that case, monsieur, the offence of which I complain was unintentional, and it was not to aggravate the offence that you returned here. I believe this, monsieur, and this should satisfy you, I think."

"If you desire it, mademoiselle, I will leave at once without saying a word in my own defence."

"Do have a little pity, my dear young lady," pleaded M. Bouffard. "You have allowed me to speak, now listen to the gentleman."

Whereupon the Duc de Senneterre, taking Herminie's silence for an assent, said :

"Mademoiselle, this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I was passing along the street, looking for lodgings, and naturally paused in front of the house as I saw several notices of rooms to rent. I asked permission to inspect the apartments, and going on in advance of the portress, who promised to join me in a minute, I began to ascend the stairs. As I reached the first landing my attention was attracted by a timid, supplicating voice. This voice was yours, mademoiselle, and you were pleading with this gentleman. I paused involuntarily, not from any idle curiosity, but because I could not listen to such a touching appeal unmoved. So I heard all, and my only thought was that a woman was

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in trouble, and that I could save her, without her even knowing it, so seeing a man come out of your room a few minutes afterwards I called to him."

"Yes," continued M. Bouffard, "and said to me angrily, 'Here is money, pay yourself, and cease to torment a woman, who is only too unhappy already.' If I did not tell you this at first, my dear young lady, it was only because I wanted to have my little joke, and afterwards I was frightened to see how angry you were."

"That is my offence, mademoiselle," continued Gerald. "I yielded to a thoughtless, though not ungenerous impulse, whose deplorable consequences I did not foresee. I unfortunately forgot that the sacred right to render certain services belongs only to tried and trusted friends. I forgot, too, that, however spontaneous and disinterested commiseration may be, it may nevertheless be a cruel insult under some circumstances. When this gentleman told me of your just indignation, mademoiselle, and told me the wrong I had unwittingly done you, I felt it to be my duty as an honourable man to come and beg your pardon, and tell you the simple truth. I had never had the honour of seeing you; I did not even know your name, and I shall probably never see you again, but I wish that I could convince you that I had not the slightest intention of insulting you, and that I never realised the gravity of my offence until now."

Gerald was speaking the truth, and his sincerity, emotion, and tact convinced Herminie that such, indeed, was the case.

Another and entirely different idea also influenced the ingenuous girl, or, rather, an apparently trivial but to her highly significant circumstance, viz., that the stranger was seeking a modest lodging. This convinced her that he was not rich, and that the generosity he had manifested towards her must necessarily have been at the cost of no little personal sacrifice.

These considerations, aided very considerably, per-

haps,—and why not, may we ask?—by the influence almost always exerted by a handsome, frank, and expressive face, appeased Herminie's wrath wonderfully. In fact, far from feeling the slightest indignation against Gerald now, she was really touched by the generous impulse to which he had yielded, and which he had just explained with such perfect frankness, and too honest and ingenuous herself to conceal her thoughts, she said to Gerald, with charming simplicity:

“My embarrassment is very great, monsieur, for I must reproach myself for having entirely misinterpreted an act, the kindness of which I now appreciate. I can only beg you to forget the intemperance of my first remarks.”

“Permit me to say, on the contrary, that I shall never forget them, mademoiselle,” replied Gerald, “for they will always remind me that there is one attribute which should be respected above all others in a woman,—her dignity.”

And bowing deferentially to Herminie, Gerald turned to leave the room.

M. Bouffard had listened to the latter part of this conversation in open-mouthed wonder, it being just about as intelligible to him as if it had been carried on in Greek; but now checking Gerald, who had started towards the door, the ex-grocer, evidently with the idea that he was achieving a master-stroke, exclaimed:

“One moment, my good sir, one moment. As mademoiselle is no longer offended with you, there is no reason why you shouldn't take those nice little rooms on the third floor I was telling you about,—a small hall, and two cozy rooms; one that will answer for a sitting-room, and the other for a bedroom—just the thing for a bachelor.”

On hearing this proposal, Herminie became very uneasy, for it would have been decidedly unpleasant to see Gerald installed in the same house.

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But the young duke promptly replied :

" I have already told you that the rooms would not suit me, my dear sir."

" Yes, because this young lady was offended with you, and it is very unpleasant to be on bad terms with one's fellow tenants. But now this young lady has forgiven you, there is no reason you shouldn't take those nice rooms."

" I am even less inclined to take them now," replied Gerald, venturing a glance at Herminie.

The young girl did not raise her eyes, but she blushed slightly, for she appreciated the delicacy of Gerald's refusal.

" What!" exclaimed M. Bouffard, profoundly astonished ; " now you have made up with mademoiselle, you are less inclined to take them than ever ? Is it possible that you have noticed any objections to my house since you came back ? "

" It is not precisely that which deprives me of the pleasure of taking up my abode under your roof, my dear sir, but — "

" Come, I'll let you have those rooms for two hundred and fifty francs, with a small cellar thrown in, if you want it."

" Impossible, my dear sir, impossible."

" Call it two hundred and forty, then, and say no more about it."

" I am obliged to call your attention to the fact that mademoiselle's room is not the place for this haggling, monsieur."

Then turning to Herminie and bowing profoundly, the young duke said :

" Believe me, mademoiselle, I shall always retain a most delightful recollection of this first and last interview."

The girl bowed graciously, but without raising her eyes, and Gerald departed, resolutely pursued by M.

Bouffard, who seemed determined not to lose his prey.

But Gerald remained obdurate in spite of the landlord's tempting offers. The ex-grocer persisted in his efforts, so Gerald, to get rid of him, and perhaps also to have an opportunity to think over his meeting with Herminie, quickened his pace and told the landlord that he intended to extend his walk as far as the fortifications. So he started off, leaving M. Bouffard in despair at having missed this fine opportunity to rent those charming third story rooms.

A road leading to the fortifications intersected the Rue de Monceau near this point. Gerald took it, and then strolled slowly along, absorbed in a profound reverie.

Herminie's rare beauty, as well as her dignity and refinement of manner had made a deep impression on the young duke, and the more he said to himself that he had, of course, seen this charming creature for the first and last time, the more he rebelled against the thought.

Besides, upon analysing or rather comparing his former fancies with his sudden but deep interest in Herminie, and discovering nothing like it in the past, Gerald asked himself, with no little uneasiness:

“What if I should be really caught this time?”

He had just asked himself this question when he was met by an officer of engineers wearing an army redingote without epaulettes, and a big straw hat.

“Why, it's Senneterre!” exclaimed this officer.

The young duke looked up and recognised Captain Comtois, one of his former comrades in the African army.

“How are you, my dear Comtois?” he exclaimed, cordially offering his hand. “I did not expect to see you here, though you are quite in your native element, I must admit,” he added, with a glance at the fortifications.

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“Yes, my dear fellow, we’re making the earth fly and the work is advancing rapidly. I am general-in-chief of that army of labourers and masons you see over there. In Africa, we tore down walls ; here, we build them up. Did you come over to look at the works ? If you did, I’ll show you about.”

“A thousand thanks for your kind offer, my dear Comtois, I’ll remind you of your promise some day soon.”

“Very well, come and take breakfast with me any morning you like. I am living in camp over there. It will remind you of old times ; you’ll think you’re in a Bedouin camp again. Oh, by the way, you remember Clarville, that young lieutenant of *spahis* who resigned in order that he might have the satisfaction of fighting Colonel Duval a year afterwards ?”

“Clarville ? Yes, a brave fellow—I remember him perfectly.”

“Well, after he resigned, he had very little to live on, and the failure of some bank swept away the little that he had. In fact, if I hadn’t happened to come across him, I believe he would have starved. Fortunately, I was able to take him on as overseer, and that pays him a little something.”

“Poor fellow ! it was a lucky thing for him, though.”

“I should think so, particularly as he is married,—a love-match,—that is to say, the girl hadn’t a penny, and there are two little children in the bargain, so you can judge of his situation. He manages to make both ends meet, but that is all. I have been to see him. He lives in a side street at the end of the Rue de Monceau.”

“At the end of the Rue de Monceau ?” asked Gerald, hastily. “I, too, must go and see him.”

“He would be delighted, my dear Senneterre, for when misfortunes come, one’s visitors are rare.”

“What is the number of the house ?”

“It is the only house on the street,—a little bit of a

house. The devil ! There's the second bell. I must leave you, my dear Senneterre, and get my men together. Good-bye ; don't forget your promise."

"No, certainly not."

"And I may tell Clarville you're coming to see him ?"

"Yes, day after to-morrow."

"It will please him very much ; good-bye."

"Good-bye, my dear fellow."

"Don't forget Clarville's address."

"I am not very likely to," thought Gerald. "The street where he lives must skirt the end of the garden of the house where I just saw that adorable girl."

So, while the captain rushed off towards a group of wooden shanties in the distance, Gerald strolled along, a prey to a sort of feverish agitation.

The sun was low in the horizon when he awoke from his reverie.

"I don't know what will come of all this," he said to himself, "but this time, and it is the only time, I feel that I'm gone, absolutely gone, this time !"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PRIVATE STAIRWAY.

IN spite of the deep and novel impression made upon Gerald by his interview with Herminie, he had met Ernestine de Beaumesnil; for, in accordance with the plans of the Rochaiguës, the richest heiress in France had directly or indirectly made the acquaintance of the three aspirants for her hand.

A month had passed since these different presentations, and since the first interview between Gerald and Herminie, an interview whose consequences will become apparent later on.

The clock had just struck eleven, and Mlle. de Beaumesnil was sitting alone in her chamber, deeply absorbed in thought. Her girlish face had lost none of its sweetness and candour, though a rather sarcastic, and sometimes almost mournful, smile occasionally flitted across her lips, and one sometimes noticed a resolute expression, which contrasted strangely with the almost childish ingenuousness of her features.

Suddenly Mlle. de Beaumesnil rose, walked to the mantel, and placed her hand on the bell rope; then she paused a moment as if undecided in relation to some important matter.

At last, as if her mind was fully made up, she rang, and almost immediately Madame Lafné, her governess, entered, with an eager, almost obsequious, air.

“Does mademoiselle desire anything?” she asked.

“Sit down, my dear Lafné.”

“Mademoiselle is too kind.”

“Sit down, I beg. There is something I wish to say to you.”

“Only to obey mademoiselle,” said the governess, much surprised at this familiarity on the part of her young mistress, who had always treated her heretofore with marked reserve.

“My dear Lafné,” said Mlle. de Beaumesnil, in an almost affectionate tone, “you have often told me that I could count upon your attachment.”

“Oh, yes, mademoiselle.”

“And upon your devotion as well ?”

“In life and in death, mademoiselle.”

“And also upon your discretion ?”

“I only ask that mademoiselle will put me to the test, then she can judge,” replied the governess, more and more delighted with this truly promising beginning.

“Very well, I am about to put you to the test.”

“How rejoiced I am at such a mark of confidence on mademoiselle’s part !”

“Yes, a mark of great confidence, of which I hope you will be found deserving.”

“I swear to mademoiselle that—”

“Oh, I believe you,” said Ernestine, interrupting these protestations on the part of her governess; “but tell me, nearly a week ago you asked me to give you to-morrow evening, in order that you might attend a small reunion which takes place every Sunday night at the house of one of your friends named — What is the name ? I have forgotten it.”

“Her name is Madame Herbaut, mademoiselle. This friend of mine has two daughters, and every Sunday she invites a few people of their age to her house. I think I said as much to mademoiselle when I asked her permission to attend the entertainment.”

“And who are these young people ?”

“The young girls who visit Madame Herbaut are

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mostly shop-girls, or young women who give music and drawing lessons. There are also several bookkeepers among them. As for the men, they are, for the most part, shop-keepers, or musicians, or lawyer's clerks,—all very respectable young men, I assure you, for Madame Herbaut is very particular about the people she invites, and very naturally, as she has daughters to marry off, and between you and me, mademoiselle, it is to establish them in life that she gives these little reunions."

"My dear Lafné," said Ernestine, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "I want to attend one of these reunions at Madame Herbaut's."

"Mademoiselle!" exclaimed the governess, thinking her ears must have deceived her, "what did mademoiselle say?"

"I said I wished to attend one of Madame Herbaut's entertainments,—to-morrow evening, for instance."

"Good heavens! Is mademoiselle really in earnest?"

"Decidedly so."

"What, you, mademoiselle, go to the house of such a very humble person! Impossible! Mademoiselle cannot even be thinking of such a thing?"

"Impossible, and why, my good Lafné?"

"Why, the baron and baroness would never give their consent."

"So I do not intend to ask it."

"But mademoiselle would not go to Madame Herbaut's without consulting the baron!" cried the governess.

"Certainly."

"But how could you, mademoiselle?"

"My dear Lafné, you told me a minute ago that I could count upon you."

"And I repeat it, mademoiselle."

"Very well, then, you must take me to Madame Herbaut's to-morrow evening."

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"I, mademoiselle? Really, I don't know whether I am awake or only dreaming."

"You are not dreaming, so to-morrow evening you will introduce me to Madame Herbaut as one of your relatives, an orphan."

"One of my relatives! Great Heavens! I should never dare!"

"Let me finish, please. You will introduce me, I say, as one of your relatives, recently arrived from the country, who earns her living as—as an embroiderer, for example. But, remember this, if you are guilty of the slightest indiscretion or blunder, and so cause any one to suspect that I am not what I wish to appear, that is to say, an orphan who supports herself by her own exertions, you will not remain another minute in my service, while if you follow my instructions carefully you may expect anything from me."

"Really, mademoiselle, you surprised me so I cannot seem to get over it. But why does mademoiselle wish me to introduce her to Madame Herbaut as a relative of mine and an orphan?"

"Don't ask me any more questions, Lafné. Can I depend upon you, yes or no?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, in life and in death. But—"

"No 'buts,' if you please, and now one word more, and the last. You know, of course," added the young girl, with a strangely bitter smile, "that I am the richest heiress in France."

"Certainly, mademoiselle, everybody knows that, and says that there is no other fortune in the country nearly as large as mademoiselle's."

"Ah, well, if you will do what I ask, and, above all, if you will be discreet, thoroughly discreet, understand,—I insist upon that, for it is absolutely necessary that Madame Herbaut should believe me what I mean to appear, a poor orphan supporting herself by her own exertions,—in short, if, thanks to your cleverness and

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discretion, everything passes off as I wish, you shall see how the richest heiress in France pays a debt of gratitude."

"What you say pains me deeply, mademoiselle," exclaimed the governess, with a gesture of superb disinterestedness. "Can mademoiselle suppose that I wish to set a price on my devotion?"

"No, but I deem it only right to set a price on my gratitude."

"Good Heavens! Mademoiselle, you know very well that if you should become as poor as I am I should be just as devoted to you."

"I do not doubt that in the least, but until I become poor, do what I ask. Take me to Madame Herbaut's to-morrow evening."

"But if you will talk the matter over a little you will see how impossible your plan is."

"And why?"

"In the first place, how can you arrange to have the disposal of your evening? The baron and baroness and Mlle. Helena never leave you."

"Oh, I can manage that very easily. To-morrow morning I will say that I passed a very uncomfortable night, and that I am not feeling at all well. I will remain in my room all day, and to-morrow evening you will go to the family and tell them that I am asleep and don't wish to be disturbed by anybody. My guardian and his family respect my slightest wish so abjectly that they will not dare to disturb my slumbers," added Mlle. de Beaumesnil, with mingled sadness and disdain.

"Oh, mademoiselle is perfectly right about that. No one would dare to contradict or oppose mademoiselle in anything. If mademoiselle should tell M. le baron to stand on his head, he would do it without a word."

"Oh, yes, they are certainly the most considerate of relatives, so full of tenderness and dignity," replied Ernestine, with a rather peculiar expression. "Ah,

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well, you see, then, that it will be an easy matter for me to secure an evening to myself."

✓ "Yes, mademoiselle, but how shall we manage to get out of the house?"

"Get out of the house?"

"Yes. I mean without meeting any one on the stairway, or being seen by the concierge."

"That is your lookout. I depend upon you to devise a means of doing that."

"Oh, it is very easy to say devise a means, mademoiselle, but —"

"I foresaw this difficulty, of course, but I said to myself, 'My dear Lafné is very clever. She will assist me in this.'"

"Heaven knows I would be only too glad to, mademoiselle, but I really do not see —"

"Put on your thinking-cap. I have never used any but the main stairway, but are there no servants' stairways leading from my apartments?"

"Of course, mademoiselle. There are two such staircases, but you would run a great risk of meeting the servants if you used either of them; that is," added the governess, thoughtfully,—"that is unless you should choose the time that they are at dinner, about eight o'clock, for example."

"Your idea is an admirable one."

"Mademoiselle should not rejoice too soon."

"Why?"

"Mademoiselle will still have to pass the porter's lodge, and he is a regular Cerberus, for ever on the watch."

"That is true, we shall have to think of some other way."

"I am trying, mademoiselle, but it's no easy matter, I assure you."

"But not impossible, it seems to me."

"Ah, I have an idea, mademoiselle!" exclaimed the governess, suddenly, after reflecting a moment.

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“ Let me hear it.”

“ Excuse me, mademoiselle, but I’m not sure that it is at all feasible yet. Let me go and see. I’ll be back in a moment.”

And the governess darted out of the room. The orphan was left alone.

“ I was right,” she murmured, with an expression of bitter disgust. “ This woman has a base and mercenary nature, like so many others, but these very failings will ensure me her submission, and, above all, her discretion.”

In a few minutes the governess returned, radiant.

“ Victory, mademoiselle !” she exclaimed, rapturously.

“ Explain, if you please.”

“ Mademoiselle is aware that her dressing-room opens into my bedroom.”

“ Yes.”

“ And adjoining my chamber there is a large room containing the wardrobes for mademoiselle’s dresses.”

“ Well ?”

“ There is a door in this room which opens upon a narrow staircase to which I never paid any attention before.”

“ And where does this staircase lead ?”

“ It leads down to a small door which has been closed up, but which opens, as nearly as I can judge, upon the side street.”

“ This door opens upon the street ?” cried Mlle. de Beaumesnil, quickly.

“ Yes, mademoiselle, and this is not at all surprising. In many of the large houses in this neighbourhood there are small private stairways leading up to the sleeping apartments, because in former times the ladies of the court — ”

“ The ladies of the court ?” inquired Ernestine, so naïvely that Madame Laîné’s eyes fell before the girl’s innocent gaze.

So, fearing that she was going too far, and that she

might imperil her recently acquired intimacy with her pupil, Madame Lafné said :

“ I don’t care to fill mademoiselle’s ears with a lot of servants’ gossip.”

“ And you are right. But if this door which leads into the street is condemned, how shall we open it ? ”

“ It is bolted and nailed up on the inside — but mademoiselle needn’t worry. I have all night before me, and to-morrow morning I hope to have a good report to make to mademoiselle.”

“ Very well. If you think it necessary, inform your friend, Madame Herbaut, in advance that you will bring a relative with you to-morrow evening.”

“ I will do so, though it isn’t at all necessary. Mademoiselle, if she accompanies me, will be as cordially received as I am. There is very little ceremony among people of that class.”

“ Very well, it is understood, then. But I repeat once more that I shall expect the utmost caution on your part. Your reward depends upon that.”

“ Mademoiselle can punish me in any way she pleases if I break my word.”

“ I would much rather reward you. See what you can do about that door now, and let me hear early to-morrow morning.”

“ But really, mademoiselle, all this is very extraordinary ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ I refer to mademoiselle’s desire to go to Madame Herbaut’s. It seems to me such a strange idea on mademoiselle’s part. But I feel no uneasiness,” added the governess, with a complacent air. “ I know mademoiselle too well to suppose for one moment that she would involve a poor woman like myself in any trouble, and though I do not presume to question mademoiselle, may I not — as I, of course, must not speak of this

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matter to any one else—may I not know why, mademoiselle—”

“ Good-night, my dear Lafné,” said mademoiselle, rising, and thus putting an end to the conversation. “ Let me know the results of your researches early to-morrow morning.”

Delighted to have a secret between her pupil and herself at last, a secret which she regarded as convincing proof of a confidence which would ensure her a modest fortune, at least, Madame Lafné discreetly withdrew, leaving Mlle. de Beaumesnil again alone.

After a few moments of reflection the orphan unlocked her desk, and, opening the journal dedicated to her mother, began to write hurriedly, even impetuously.

CHAPTER XXXII.

UNBURDENING THE HEART.

“THE resolve I have just made, my dear mother,” wrote Ernestine, “is a dangerous one; I fear I did wrong to make it, but to whom can I turn for advice?

“To you, my dearest mother, I know, but it was while invoking your aid and protection that this idea occurred to me, and I feel that I must solve, at any cost, the doubts that so torment me.

“During the last few days many revelations have been made to me, some of such a sad and depressing nature that they seem to have upset me entirely, and it is with great difficulty, even now, that I can compose myself sufficiently to lay my heart bare to you, my kind and tender mother.

“For some time after my arrival in this house, I could speak only in terms of the highest praise of my guardian and his family, though sometimes in my secret heart I did censure them a little for the inordinate amount of flattery and attention they lavished upon me.

“This attention and these flatteries have not ceased; they have rather increased, if that were possible.

“My mental attributes, my character, and even my slightest word and act are praised in the most exaggerated way. As for my figure, my bearing, my personal appearance, and my every movement, they are all equally graceful, enchanting, divine,—in short, there is not a more attractive person in the world than I am.

“Saintly Mlle. Helena, who was never known to utter an untruth, assures me that I look like a madonna.

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“ Madame de la Rochaiguë says, with what she terms really brutal frankness, that I am endowed with such rare distinction and elegance of manner, as well as so many charms of person, that I am sure to become the most admired woman in Paris some day, in spite of myself.

“ And last, but not least, according to my guardian, a serious-minded and extremely thoughtful man, the beauty of my features and the dignity of my bearing give me a striking resemblance to the beautiful Duchesse de Longueville, so famous under the Fronde.

“ And when one day, in my artlessness, I expressed astonishment at my resembling so many persons at the same time, do you know, my dearest mother, what the answer was ?

“ ‘ It is very simple. In you, mademoiselle, the most diverse charms are united, so, in you, each person finds the attraction he prefers.’

“ And these flatteries pursue me everywhere. If the hair-dresser comes to arrange my hair, never before in his life did he see such superb tresses.

“ If I am taken to the milliner’s, ‘ What is the use of selecting any particular shape ?’ says that lady. ‘ With a face like mademoiselle’s any style is equally charming and becoming.’

“ The dressmaker declares that my figure is so wonderfully elegant that, dressed in a loosely fitting sack, I should drive the ladies most famed for their perfection of form wild with envy.

“ It is the same with the shoemaker, who declares that he will have to make a special last for me, never having worked for the possessor of so small a foot as mine.

“ The glovemaker outdoes him even, by declaring that I have the hand of a dwarf.

“ So you see, my dear mother, I may almost consider myself a phenomenon, fit for a museum.

“ Oh, mother, mother, it was not in this way that you

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spoke when, taking my face in your two hands, and kissing me on the forehead, you said :

“ ‘ My poor Ernestine, you are not beautiful, or even pretty, but the candour and sweetness of your disposition are so plainly written on your expressive face that I do not regret your lack of beauty.’

“ And these words of praise, the only ones, I believe, that you ever gave me, I believed, and they made me very happy.

“ But alas ! the daughter you so fondly loved, has she remained worthy of you ? I do not know. I am not sure.

“ Then I knew nothing of doubts, suspicion, and mockery ! And for several days past cruel presentiments have taken such a hold on me that I am as much astonished as alarmed.

“ There must be something terribly insidious in the effects of flattery, for — to you I must confess all — though I have often thought the praises lavished upon me must be exaggerated, I wondered why it should be that so many different people should be so unanimous in praising everything I said and did.

“ Nor is this all.

“ The other day Madame de la Rochaiguë took me to a concert. I soon perceived that everybody was looking at me. A number of persons even passed and repassed me several times, to examine me more closely, I suppose, though I was very simply dressed. Even when I come out of church I notice that every one stares at me. I mention the fact, and my guardian and his family say : ‘ Yes, you are right. Everybody does stare at you. See what a sensation you create everywhere ! ’

“ And, in the face of this evidence, what can I say ? Nothing.

“ I must admit that all this flattery was becoming very pleasant to me. It surprised me less and less, and though it sometimes occurred to me how grossly exag-

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gerated it was, I promptly silenced any misgivings on the subject, by saying to myself :

“ ‘ But if this is not true, why is the sensation I create — as my guardian says — so general ? ’

“ Alas ! I was soon to learn.

“ This is what occurred :

“ A gentleman of whom I have never dared to speak until now, has called at my guardian’s house several times. This gentleman is M. le Marquis de Maillefort. He is deformed ; he has a sardonic air, and he is always uttering the most sarcastic remarks or ironical compliments that sting worse than his sarcasms.

“ On account of the antipathy he inspired in me, I usually found some excuse for leaving the drawing-room soon after his arrival, and I was encouraged in this by the persons around me, for they both feared and hated M. de Maillefort, though they always greeted him with pretended affability.

“ Three days ago he was ushered into the room where I happened to be sitting alone with Mlle. Helena. To leave the room at once would have been too discourteous, so I remained, hoping to be able to make my escape in a few minutes.

“ This short conversation then ensued between M. de Maillefort and Mlle. Helena. Alas ! I have not forgotten a word of it.

“ ‘ Ah, good evening, my dear Mlle. Helena,’ the marquis began, with his most sarcastic air. ‘ I am delighted to find Mlle. de Beaumesnil with you. She will derive such benefit from your pious conversation. She must profit so much by your excellent counsels, as well as by those of your worthy brother and your no less excellent sister-in-law ! ’

“ ‘ We hope so, indeed, M. le marquis, for we feel that we have a sacred duty to fulfil towards Mlle. de Beaumesnil.’

“ ‘ Unquestionably,’ replied M. de Maillefort, in more and more sarcastic tones, ‘ a sacred duty to which you

and yours will sedulously devote yourselves. Are you not continually repeating to Mlle. de Beaumesnil : " You are the richest heiress in France, and being that, you are necessarily the most accomplished and wonderfully gifted person in the world ? " '

" ' But, monsieur,' exclaimed Mlle. Helena, interrupting him, ' what you say — '

" ' I leave it to Mlle. de Beaumesnil herself,' retorted the marquis. ' If she speaks the truth, will she not be obliged to admit that a continual chorus of praise is resounding around her, magnificently sustained by our dear baron, his wife, and you, Mlle. Helena,— a delightful chorus in which you all three sustain your parts with wonderful skill, with touching self-abnegation and sublime disinterestedness ? All rôles are alike to you. To-day, as leaders of the choir, you give the keynote to a crowd of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's admirers ; to-morrow, brilliant soloists, you will improvise hymns of praise which will reveal the extent of your resources, the flexibility of your art, and, above all, the adorable sincerity of your noble hearts.'

" ' I suppose, then, monsieur,' said Mlle. Helena, colouring, doubtless, with anger, ' I suppose, then, that I am to infer that our dear ward has none of the admirable traits and personal charms which are so generally conceded to her.'

" ' Because she is the richest heiress in France,' replied M. de Maillefort, with an ironical bow to me ; ' and in this character Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a right to the most outrageous as well as the most insulting flattery,— insulting, because it is so manifestly untrue, and dictated solely by baseness and cupidity.'

" I rose, and left the room, scarcely able to keep back the tears.

" I cannot forget his words, mother. They are continually ringing in my ears.

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“ M. de Maillefort’s remarks were a revelation to me. My eyes were opened. I understand everything now.

“ The praises of every sort and kind, the attentions and protestations of affection lavished upon me, the sensation I always create at entertainments, even the flattering remarks of my tradespeople, are all addressed to the richest heiress in France.

“ Ah, mother, it was not without cause that I wrote you of the strange and unpleasant effect it produced upon me when, the day after my arrival in this house, I was so pompously informed that I was the mistress of a colossal fortune.

“ ‘ It seems to me,’ I said to you then, ‘ that I am in the situation of a person who possesses a valuable treasure, and fears that it may be stolen from him at any moment.’

“ I understand this feeling now.

“ It was the vague presentiment of this fear and distrust which has pursued me so relentlessly since the truth was thus harshly revealed to me.

“ The praise bestowed upon me, the protestations of attachment made to me, are due solely to my wealth.

“ Yes, mother, M. de Maillefort’s spiteful remarks have really been productive of a great deal of good, though they did cause me so much pain, for they have enlightened me in regard to the incomprehensible but increasing dislike my guardian and his family were inspiring in my heart.

“ This revelation at last explains the obsequiousness and servility which surround me on every side.

“ And now, my dearly beloved mother, my confession becomes a painful one, even when made to thee. It may be because this atmosphere of deceit and adulation in which I am living has already contaminated me, or, perhaps, because I shrink in such dismay from the thought that all this praise and all these demonstrations of affection are due solely to my wealth, but I can

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scarcely credit so much baseness and deceitfulness, nor can I quite believe that I am so utterly unattractive, or that I am wholly incapable of inspiring any sincere and disinterested affection.

"And you see, my dearest mother, I no longer know what to think, not only of other people, but of myself. These doubts, this continual suspicion and distrust, are intolerable. I try in vain to devise some means of discovering the truth. From whom can I expect an honest reply ?

"Nor is this all. Several recent events have rendered my situation still more trying.

"You shall judge of it.

"M. de Maillefort's sarcastic allusions in regard to the perfections which I must necessarily possess in my character of heiress have doubtless been repeated to my guardian and his wife by Mlle. Helena, or else some other event, of which I am ignorant, has induced those around me to disclose projects of which I had no previous knowledge or even suspicion, and which have increased my distrust and uneasiness a thousandfold."

Mademoiselle was here interrupted in her writing by two cautious raps at her door.

Surprised and almost terrified, as in her preoccupation she had forgotten the subject of her late conversation with her governess, the orphan asked, in trembling tones :

"Who is it ?"

"I, mademoiselle," replied Madame Laîné's voice.

"Come in," said Ernestine, remembering now.

"What is the matter ?" she asked, as her governess entered.

"I have some good news for mademoiselle. My hands are all bloody, you see, but that doesn't matter."

"I see," cried Ernestine, greatly alarmed. "What has happened ? How did you hurt yourself so ? Here, take this handkerchief and stanch the blood."

"Oh, it's but a mere scratch, mademoiselle," replied

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the governess, heroically. "In your service, I would brave death itself."

This exaggeration cooled Mlle. de Beaumesnil's compassion very considerably, and she replied :

"I believe in your courageous devotion, of course, but pray bind up your hand."

"If mademoiselle desires it, of course, but this scratch is of no consequence, for the door is open, mademoiselle. I succeeded in prying out the staples of the padlock, and in removing an iron bar that also secured the door, which opens into the street exactly as I supposed."

"You may be sure that I shall reward you, my dear Laîné, for this — "

"Oh, do not speak of rewarding me, I implore you, mademoiselle. Am I not more than paid in the pleasure of serving you ? But mademoiselle will excuse me, I hope, for coming back contrary to her orders, but I was so delighted to have succeeded."

"On the contrary I am very grateful for the zeal you have manifested. So you think we can count upon carrying out our plans to-morrow ?"

"There isn't the slightest doubt of that, now, mademoiselle."

"Then have a very simple white dress ready for me to wear to-morrow evening, and as soon as it is dark you and I will go to Madame Herbaut's. And once more let me remind you that I shall expect you to exercise the greatest caution."

"Mademoiselle need have no anxiety on that account. Has mademoiselle any further orders ?"

"No, I only desire to thank you again for your zeal."

"Then I will bid mademoiselle good night."

"Good night, my dear Laîné."

The governess left the room and Mlle. de Beaumesnil resumed her writing.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE THREE RIVALS.

"IN order to fully understand these recent events, it is necessary to review the past, my dear mother," Mlle. de Beaumesnil continued.

"The day after my arrival at my guardian's house I went to church with Mlle. Helena, who during mass called my attention to a young man who was praying fervently before the same altar.

"This young man I afterwards learned was a M. Célestin de Macreuse.

"Mlle. Helena's attention had been attracted to him, she told me, because, instead of kneeling upon a chair like every one else, he was kneeling upon the marble floor of the church. It must have been for his mother, too, that he was praying, for we afterwards heard him ask the priest who took up the collection in our part of the church for another novena of masses in the same chapel for the repose of his mother's soul.

"As we were coming out of church, M. de Macreuse offered us the holy water with a bow, for he had preceded us to the font. A moment afterwards, we saw him distributing alms among a number of beggars who had crowded around him, saying in a faltering voice: 'The little I can give, I offer you in the name of my mother who is no more. Pray for her.'

"Just as M. de Macreuse was disappearing in the crowd I perceived M. de Maillefort. Whether he was

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just entering or leaving the church I can not say; but Mlle. Helena, who caught sight of him just as I did, seemed surprised and even disturbed by his presence.

"On our way home she spoke several times of this M. de Macreuse, who seemed to be so truly devout and charitable. She did not know him personally, she said, but she could not help feeling a great interest in him because he seemed to possess virtues seldom found in young men of the present day.

"The next day we went to church again; and again we saw M. de Macreuse. He was performing his devotions in the same chapel, and this time he was so deeply absorbed in prayer that, when mass was over, he remained on his knees with his forehead almost touching the marble pavement, and seemed positively crushed with grief. A moment afterwards he fell backward in a sort of swoon, and had to be carried into the sacristy.

"'Unfortunate young man,' whispered Mlle. Helena, 'how inconsolable he is! How deeply he mourns for his mother! What a noble and tender heart he must have.'

"I shared this feeling of compassion, for who could better sympathise with the sorrow of this young man whose melancholy face indicated the deepest grief.

"Just as the door of the sacristy opened to admit the beadles, who had come to M. de Macreuse's assistance, M. de Maillefort, who chanced to be directly in their path, began to smile ironically.

"Mlle. Helena seemed more and more disturbed to see M. de Maillefort at church a second time.

"'This imp of Satan must have come to the house of God for some deviltry or other,' she remarked to me.

"On the afternoon of that same day, Madame de la Rochaiguë insisted upon my driving with her and one of her friends, Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre, a lady I had never met before. We went to the Bois. There were a great many people there, and as our carriage was

moving along at a snail's pace, Madame de la Rochaiguë remarked to her friend :

"‘Isn't that your son I see on horseback over there, my dear duchess?’

"‘Yes, I believe it is Gerald,’ replied Madame de Senneterre, turning her lorgnette in the direction indicated.

"‘I hope he will see us, and come and speak to us,’ added Madame de Mirecourt, who was also with us.

"‘Oh, M. de Senneterre will not fail to do that, as the duchess fortunately is with us,’ replied Madame de la Rochaiguë. ‘I say fortunately, but that is not exactly the word, as that lady’s presence prevents us from saying all we would like to say in M. Gerald’s praise.’

"‘Oh, as for that, I warn you I haven’t a bit of maternal modesty,’ answered Madame de Senneterre, smiling. ‘I never hear half enough nice things said about my son.’

"‘However exacting you may be, you ought to be very well satisfied on that score, it seems to me, my dear duchess,’ replied Madame de Mirecourt.

"‘But speaking of M. de Senneterre, did you ever hear why he enlisted as a common soldier, at the age of eighteen?’ continued Madame de Mirecourt, addressing Madame de la Rochaiguë.

"‘No,’ replied that lady, ‘I have heard that, beginning as a common soldier, in spite of his birth, he gained his several promotions, as well as his cross, on the battle-field, at the cost of several wounds; but I never heard why he enlisted.’

"‘Madame la duchesse,’ said Madame de Mirecourt, turning to Madame de Senneterre, ‘is it not true that your son enlisted because he thought it cowardly to hire a man to go and be killed in his stead?’

"‘Yes, that is true,’ replied Madame de Senneterre; ‘that is the reason my son gave us, and he carried out his resolution in spite of my tears and entreaties.’

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“‘Superb!’ exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë. ‘Nobody in the world but M. de Senneterre would ever have made and carried out such a chivalrous resolution as that.’

“‘It is easy to judge of the generosity of his character from that fact alone,’ added Madame de Mirecourt.

“‘Oh, I can say with just pride that there is no better son in the world than my Gerald,’ remarked Madame de Senneterre.

“‘And when one says that, one says everything,’ added Madame de la Rochaiguë.

“I listened in silence to this conversation, naturally sharing in the admiration that M. de Senneterre’s generous act excited in those around me.

“A few minutes afterwards, a party of young men passed us on horseback. One of them, I noticed, paused on seeing us, wheeled his horse around and came back.

“This young man proved to be M. de Senneterre. He bowed to his mother; Madame de la Rochaiguë introduced him to me. He made a few courteous remarks, and then walked his horse along by the side of our carriage while we drove several times around the race-track.

“It is needless to say that scarcely a handsome equipage passed without an interchange of friendly bows between the occupants and M. de Senneterre, who seemed to be a general favourite.

“During the conversation he had with us, he was very gay and a trifle sarcastic, but not the least spiteful.

“A short time before he left us, we met a magnificent carriage, drawn by four horses. Its sole occupant was a man to whom many persons bowed with great deference. This man bowed very low to M. de Senneterre, who, instead of returning the salute, surveyed him with the utmost disdain.

“‘Why, that was M. du Tilleul that just passed, M.

de Senneterre !' exclaimed Madame de la Rochaiguë, evidently much surprised.

"‘Yes, madame.’

"‘He bowed to you.’

"‘True, madame.’

"‘But you did not return his bow.’

"‘I no longer bow to M. du Tilleul, madame.’

"‘But everybody else does.’

"‘Then they do very wrong, in my opinion.’

"‘But why, M. de Senneterre ?’

"‘You ask me that, with his recent affair with Madame — ’

"Then suddenly checking himself, probably on account of my presence, he continued, addressing Madame de la Rochaiguë :

"‘You have heard about his conduct with a certain marquise ?’

"‘Of course.’

"‘Well, in my opinion, a man who behaves with such cowardice and cruelty is a scoundrel, and I do not bow to a scoundrel.’

"‘Still, he is received everywhere,’ remarked Madame de Mirecourt.

"‘Yes, because he owns the handsomest house in Paris, and everybody wishes to attend his entertainments.’

"‘Oh, you are entirely too particular, M. Gerald,’ said Madame de Mirecourt.

"‘I too particular ?’ exclaimed M. de Senneterre, laughing. ‘What a frightful slander ! I will convince you to the contrary. Look at that little green brougham coming this way, and that — ’

"‘Gerald !’ cried Madame de Senneterre, reminding her son of my presence with a look, for I had involuntarily turned to glance at the vehicle to which M. de Senneterre had called attention, and which was occupied by a young and extremely pretty woman, who seemed to be following the young duke with her eyes.

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“ His mother’s warning exclamation, and the look she cast at me, made M. de Senneterre bite his lips, but it was with a smile that he replied :

“ ‘ You are right, mother. It would make angels too unhappy to know that there are such things as demons in the world.’

“ This half apology was indirectly addressed to me, I suppose, for two of the ladies glanced at me, smiling in their turn, and I felt greatly embarrassed.

“ As we were leaving, Madame de Senneterre asked :

“ ‘ You dine with me to-day, do you not, Gerald ? ’

“ ‘ No, mother, and I must ask you to pardon me for not having told you that I had made another engagement.’

“ ‘ That is very unfortunate, for I, too, have made an engagement for you,’ replied Madame de Senneterre, smiling.

“ ‘ All right, mother,’ said M. de Senneterre, affectionately ; ‘ I will send my friends a brief note of excuse ; then I shall be entirely at your service.’

“ And after having bowed very deferentially to us, M. de Senneterre started his horse off at a gallop.

“ He rides with perfect skill and grace, and on horseback reminds me not a little of my poor father.

“ Though he had addressed only a very few remarks to me, I feel sure, from what I saw and heard during this interview, that M. de Senneterre must possess a frank, generous, and resolute nature, as well as a profound respect and affection for his mother. The other ladies must have thought so, too, for they did not cease praising him until we separated.

“ The next day and the day following, we again saw M. de Macreuse at church. His grief seemed no less deep, though more calm. Two or three times he happened to glance in our direction, and I could not help being struck by the contrast between his sad, almost timid look and bearing, and M. le Duc de Senneterre’s dashing ease of manner.

"The next day after our visit to the Bois, I accompanied my guardian to the garden of the Luxembourg, as I had promised.

"We had visited the conservatories and the magnificent rose gardens, when we met a friend of M. de la Rochaiguë. He was introduced to me as the Baron de Ravil or du Ravil, I believe.

"This gentleman walked along beside us for several minutes, then, drawing out his watch, he remarked to M. de la Rochaiguë :

"'Pardon me for leaving you so soon, M. le baron, but I am very anxious not to miss this important session.'

"'What important session ?' inquired my guardian.

"'Can it be that you haven't heard that M. de Mornand speaks to-day ?'

"'Is it possible ?'

"'Certainly ; all Paris will be there, for when M. de Mornand speaks, it is an event.'

"'It is indeed. He is a man of wonderful talent, I think, a man who can hardly fail to be minister some day or other. How unfortunate that I did not hear of this before. I am sure, my dear ward, that the session would have interested you very much, in spite of all Madame de la Rochaiguë's nonsensical talk, but if I should take you to the chamber now she would be sure to accuse me of having set a trap for you.'

"'Still, if mademoiselle has the slightest desire to attend the session, I am at your service, M. le baron,' said our companion ; 'I expected to meet one of my nieces and her husband here, but they have not come, and probably will not, now. I had procured tickets of admission to the diplomatic gallery for them, and if these tickets would be of any service to you — '

"'What do you say, my dear ward ?'

"'I will do whatever you like, monsieur ; but it seems to me a session of the Chamber of Peers might be

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very interesting,' I added, chiefly out of regard for my guardian, I fear.

“ ‘Very well, I will accept your offer, then, my dear M. de Ravil,’ cried M. de la Rochaiguë, ‘and you are lucky, indeed, my dear child,’ he added, turning to me, ‘to happen here on a day M. de Mornand speaks.’

“ We hastened towards the palace, and just as we were leaving the quincunxes I saw, some distance off, M. de Maillefort, who seemed to be following us,—a fact that surprised me, and made me rather uneasy.

“ ‘Why do I meet this wicked man at every turn?’ I said to myself. ‘Who could have informed him of our plans?’

“ The diplomatic gallery, where we had seats, was filled with elegantly dressed ladies. I occupied a seat on the upper row of benches between my guardian and M. de Ravil.

“ A gentleman near us, having been heard to remark that some noted orator—he did not refer to M. de Mornand—was also to speak during the session, M. de Ravil replied that there was no other orator who could compare with M. de Mornand, and that this crowd had come to hear him. He ascended the tribune almost immediately, and there was a profound silence.

“ I was incapable of criticising or even of entirely comprehending M. de Mornand’s discourse. It related to subjects with which I was totally unacquainted, but I was deeply impressed by the conclusion of his speech, in which he spoke with the warmest sympathy of the unhappy lot of fishermen’s families awaiting in sickening suspense upon the beach the return of a beloved father, son, or husband, while the tempest was raging wildly around them.

“ It so happened that, as M. de Mornand uttered these touching words, he turned towards our tribune, and his strong face seemed to me filled with a profound com-

passion for the unfortunate creatures whose cause he had espoused.

“‘Wonderful! How very touching!’ whispered M. de Ravil, wiping his eyes, for he, too, seemed deeply affected.

“‘M. de Mornand is sublime!’ exclaimed my guardian. ‘There is little doubt that his speech will greatly ameliorate the lot of thousands of these unfortunates.’

Prolonged applause followed the conclusion of M. de Mornand’s speech. He was about to leave the tribune when another member of the Chamber, a man with a malevolent, sarcastic face, rose in his seat, and said:

“‘I ask the permission of the Chamber to ask M. de Mornand a simple question before he descends from the tribune and before his sudden and generous compassion for our brave fishermen shall consequently have evaporated.’

“‘If you will take my advice, we will leave at once to escape the crowd,’ M. de Ravil remarked to my guardian. ‘M. de Mornand having finished, everybody will want to go, for there will be nothing else of interest.’

M. de la Rochaiguë offered me his arm, but just as we were leaving the hall we heard shouts of laughter, and renewed applause.

“‘I know what that means,’ remarked M. de Ravil. ‘M. de Mornand has crushed, by his sarcasm, the imprudent member who had the audacity to question any of his statements, for when he wishes to be, M. de Mornand is as witty as the devil.’

“My guardian having suggested that we extend our walk to the observatory, I consented, and M. de Ravil accompanied us.

“‘M. le baron,’ he remarked to my guardian; ‘did you notice Madame de Bretigny, who left the hall just as we did?’

“‘The wife of the minister? No, I did not.’

“‘I am sorry, monsieur, for you would have seen one of the noblest women that ever lived. You have no idea

THE THREE RIVALS.

what wonderfully good use she makes of her position as a minister's wife, or of the vast amount of good she does, the wrongs she repairs, and the assistance she gives to the worthy.'

"I am not surprised to hear it," replied my guardian. "In a position like that of Madame de Bretigny, one can do any amount of good, for —"

"But interrupting himself suddenly, he turned to M. de Ravil and exclaimed, eagerly:

"Say, isn't that he over there in that secluded path, walking along, looking at the flowers?"

"To whom do you refer?"

"Why, to M. de Mornand. Look!"

"You're right, it is he!" replied M. de Ravil. "He has forgotten his triumph — and is finding a welcome relief from the onerous cares of state in gazing at the flowers. This does not surprise me, however, for, with all his talent and his political genius, he is one of the best and most simple-hearted of men, and his tastes prove it. After his brilliant success, what does he seek? Solitude and flowers."

"M. de Ravil, you know M. de Mornand, do you not?" inquired my guardian.

"Slightly. I meet him occasionally in society."

"But you know him well enough to speak to him, do you not?"

"Certainly."

"Then go and congratulate him on the success he just achieved. We will follow you so as to get a closer look at this great man. What do you say to my scheme, my dear ward?"

"I will accompany you, monsieur. One always likes to see distinguished men like M. de Mornand."

"Changing our course, we soon reached the path where M. de Mornand was walking. He replied to M. de Ravil's and my guardian's compliments with quite as much modesty as simplicity of manner, and addressed

a few kindly remarks to me, after which we left him to continue his lonely promenade.

“‘When one thinks that this simple-mannered man will govern France in less than six months!’ exclaimed M. de Ravil.

“‘Say admirably-mannered, my dear M. de Ravil,’ corrected my guardian. ‘M. de Mornand has quite the manner of a grand seigneur. He is both affable and dignified. He is not one of those silly popinjays who think only of the tie of their cravats and the cut of their hair.’

“‘Creatures of that type are never likely to govern France,’ answered M. de Ravil. ‘I say govern because M. de Mornand will not accept a subordinate position. He will be chief of the Cabinet which he forms. May Heaven preserve him, M. le Baron. The welfare of France and the peace of the civilised world depend upon him,’ added M. de Ravil, in tones of profound conviction.

“As I walked homeward with my guardian, I thought that there could indeed be no more enviable and noble position than that of a man who, like M. de Mornand, exercises a controlling influence over the welfare of France and the peace of Europe.

“Such, my dear mother, were the circumstances under which I met, for the first time, Messieurs Macreuse, Senneterre, and Mornand.

“I will now tell you what the consequences of these meetings have been.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TORMENTED BY DOUBTS.

“AT the expiration of a few days Mlle. Helena had succeeded in securing full information in regard to M. Célestin de Macreuse, and she began to talk of him, not occasionally, but almost incessantly.

“She told me that M. de Macreuse, by his birth and connections, was entitled to a place in the very best society; but, being endowed with the most exemplary piety, and with wonderfully philanthropic instincts, he had founded a charitable mission of the most admirable kind, and though still young, his name was uttered everywhere with the most profound affection and respect.

“Madame de la Rochaiguë, on the other hand, praised M. de Senneterre in the most extravagant way, while my guardian embraced every opportunity to laud M. de Mornand’s talents and virtues to the skies.

“At first I saw nothing extraordinary in these flattering mentions of persons who seemed well worthy of praise, but I soon began to notice that the names of these gentlemen were mentioned by my guardian, his wife, or his sister only in conversations which one or the other had separately with me.

“At last came the day when M. de Maillefert so spitefully, but, alas! so truly, explained the real cause of the attentions and flattery lavished upon me, and it soon became evident to me that my guardian and his wife, apprised of the situation by Mlle. Helena, must fear the

consequences of the revelation which had been such a shock to me ; for the very next day each one of the three, in turn, disclosed his or her plans to me,—plans evidently conceived long before,—and assured me that the happiness of my life and the certainty of a blissful future depended upon my marrying—

“ M. de Macreuse,—according to Mlle. Helena.

“ M. de Senneterre,—according to Madame de la Rochaiguë.

“ M. de Mornand,—according to my guardian.

“ On hearing these unexpected proposals, my surprise and uneasiness were so great that I could make no coherent reply, and my embarrassed, incoherent words having been taken as a sort of tacit consent, I, after a little reflection, decided to leave the champions of these three suitors under the same erroneous impression.

“ This induced them to make their confidential disclosures much more complete.

“ ‘ My brother and his wife,’ said Mlle. Helena, ‘ are excellent people, but extremely vain and worldly. Neither of them is capable of appreciating the rare excellence of M. de Macreuse’s principles, his Christian virtues, and his almost angelic piety ; so we must keep our secret, my dear Ernestine, until you have chosen the husband I suggest, because he is so worthy of your choice. Then, proud and honoured by this choice, you will only have to notify my brother, your guardian, who will give his consent, I am sure, if you only evince proper firmness. If he should refuse his consent, which is not at all likely, however, we will resort to other and certain means of ensuring your happiness.’

“ ‘ My poor sister Helena,’ said M. de la Rochaiguë, in his turn, ‘ is a most excellent woman, a saint if there ever was one, but she knows nothing in the world about mundane matters. If you should take it into your head to say anything about M. de Mornand to her, she would open her eyes in astonishment, and tell you that he cares

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only for the vain things of this world, that he is ambitious of power, etc. As for my wife, she is perfect, but separate her from her balls, and her toilets, and her social gossip, and her beaux who think only of the tie of their cravats, and their strawberry-coloured gloves, and she is completely at sea, for she knows nothing in the world about higher things. To her, M. de Mornand would be a grave, serious, depressing man, a statesman, in short, and by the slighting manner in which you have heard her speak of the Chamber of Peers, my dear child, you can imagine how she would regard a proposal of marriage from him. So all this must be kept a profound secret between you and me, my dear ward, and your mind once made up, as it is I who am your guardian after all, and as your marriage will depend upon my consent, you will have no difficulty in carrying out your wishes eventually.'

" You must understand, my dear child," said Madame de la Rochaiguë, " that all I have just said to you about M. de Senneterre must be kept a profound secret between us. My sister Helena knows no more about matrimonial matters than a babe unborn, and that dear husband of mine has really gone politics mad. He dreams only of the Chamber of Peers, and knows no more about the fashions, and pleasure, and elegance, than a Huron Indian. In fact, he has no conception whatever of the delights of a life shared with a charming young duke, who is the most generous and amiable of men. So let us guard our secret well, my dearest child, and, when the time comes to inform your guardian of your decision, I'll attend to that, for M. de la Rochaiguë has been in the habit of letting me have my own way so long that I am sure he will offer no opposition in this instance, but readily consent to do whatever we wish in the matter. And now I want to tell you that a most fortunate idea occurred to me the other day," continued Madame de la Rochaiguë. " I have begged one of my

friends, whom you already know, Madame de Mirecourt, to give a ball one week from to-day; so, my dear child, next Thursday, in the public *tete-à-tete* of a quadrille, you will have an opportunity to judge of the sincerity of the sentiment M. de Senneterre feels for you.'

"The very next morning after this conversation my guardian said to me, in the most confidential manner:

"‘My wife thinks of taking you to a ball Madame de Mirecourt intends to give. You will see M. de Mornand at this entertainment, and I am sure he will not let the opportunity pass to convince you of the deep and irresistible impression the sight of you made upon him when we went to congratulate him on the success of his speech that day at the palace.’

"In like manner, a couple of days after my guardian and his wife had thus disclosed their plans, Mlle. Helena said to me:

"‘My dear Ernestine, my sister-in-law intends to take you to Madame de Mirecourt’s ball Thursday. I think this will be an excellent opportunity for you to meet M. de Macreuse, and though this poor young man, who is so bowed down with grief, has none of the frivolous attributes which enable one to shine at affairs of this kind, he has requested one of his particular friends — quite an important personage, by the way, the sister of the Bishop of Ratopolis — to ask Madame de Mirecourt for a card for him. This request was promptly complied with, so on Thursday you will see him, and I feel sure you will not be able to resist his eloquence when he tells you, as he has told me, how your adored image has followed him everywhere, and has even troubled his prayers ever since the first time he saw you at church.’

"It is consequently at the ball next Thursday, my dearest mother, that I am to have my first interview with Messrs. de Macreuse, de Senneterre and de Mornand.

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“ Even if M. de Maillefort’s sarcastic remarks had not harshly revealed the real cause of the admiration and affection so generally manifested for me, my fears and suspicions must now have been awakened by the duplicity of those around me, plotting unbeknown to each other, and deceiving each other in order to succeed in their nefarious designs. You can judge of my anxiety, my beloved mother, now these two successive revelations have assumed such grave importance.

“ To complete my confession, my dear mother, I must tell you plainly what my first impressions were in relation to the three persons the different members of the Rochaiguë family wish me to marry.

“ Up to this time, I had never given the subject of marriage so much as a thought; the day for that seemed so far off, and it was such an important matter, that if a vague thought of it ever did flit through my mind, I merely congratulated myself that there was no need of troubling myself about that matter for a long time.

“ Consequently it was not with any thought of him as a possible husband that I was touched by the evident grief of M. de Macreuse, who, like myself, was mourning the loss of a mother, though what Mlle. Helena was continually saying about the sweetness of his expression, his profound melancholy, and the kindness of his heart as shown by his munificent alms, all combined to add a profound esteem to the compassion I felt for him.

“ M. de Senneterre, by the frankness and generosity of his character, by his unaffected gaiety and the graceful elegance of his manners, had pleased me very much; and it seemed to me that it would be very easy, though I am naturally so reserved, to feel perfect confidence in him.

“ As for M. de Mornand, he had impressed me very much, though this was probably due quite as much to what I had heard about the superiority of his talents and character as to the powerful influence he seemed to

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exert, so I felt almost overwhelmed, though decidedly proud of the few kind words he addressed to me when I met him in the garden of the Luxembourg.

“And now when M. de Maillefort’s revelations have made me distrust everything and everybody, I hear that all three of these men desire to marry me. Is it strange, then, that I am no longer able to read my own heart, and that, tormented by all kinds of doubts and suspicions, I ask myself if these three suitors for my hand are not all actuated by the same base motives as the persons by whom I am surrounded.

“And harassed by these doubts, all that pleased me and all that I so much admired in them now disturbs and alarms me. What if M. de Macreuse’s grief and piety, M. de Senneterre’s charming urbanity of manner, and M. de Mornand’s grand and generous utterances, all conceal base and mercenary natures!

“Oh, mother, if you knew how terrible to me are these doubts which are completing the work of destruction M. de Maillefort’s revelation began.

“They are the more terrible because I shall always be obliged to live with my guardian and his family, and if I become convinced beyond a doubt that they have flattered and deceived me merely for their own aggrandisement, I shall feel for them only the bitterest contempt and aversion.

“Because I am immensely rich, must I be married only for my money?

“Am I doomed to the misery of such a marriage, the indifference, contempt, hatred, perhaps, that are sure to follow when a man is mean enough to wed a woman merely for mercenary motives?

“Oh, mother, the thought is so horrible that it haunts me continually. I can not drive it away, strive as I may.

“So I have resolved to escape from it at the cost of a dangerous, perhaps fatal experiment.

“I have been induced to make this resolve because it

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seemed to be the only means of satisfying my cruel doubts, not only in regard to others, but myself as well. I must know once for all what I really am, and what I really appear to be, independent of my fortune.

"Satisfied on this point, I shall easily be able to distinguish the true from the false. But how am I to ascertain what I am? How am I to discover my precise value, so to speak? Whom can I ask? Who will be frank enough to separate the young girl from the heiress in his valuation?

"Besides, would such a verdict, however severe or kindly it might be, satisfy and reassure me entirely?

"No, I must have the verdict of several disinterested parties.

"But where can I find any such persons? After a great deal of thought, I have decided upon this plan.

"Madame Laîné was telling me about a week ago of some little entertainments that one of her friends gives every Sunday. I have sought and found, this evening, a way to attend one of these reunions in company with my governess, but ostensibly as a relative of hers, a young orphan who supports herself by her daily toil, like all the other young people who compose the company.

"There no one will know me. What they really think of me will be shown conclusively by the reception given me. The rare perfections with which I am endowed—according to those around me—have had such a sudden and irresistible effect, they say, upon them, and upon the husbands they have picked out for me,—in short, I produce such a sensation at all the assemblies I frequent, that I am anxious to see if I shall prove equally irresistible to the young people at Madame Herbaut's modest entertainment.

"If I do not, I shall know that I have been basely deceived, and there is little danger that I shall ever endanger my future happiness by fixing my choice upon either of the suitors attracted solely by cupidity.

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"I am also resolved to find some means of escaping the snares that seem to surround me on every side.

"What means I do not know. Alas! alone in the world as I am, in whom can I confide? In whom can I trust?

"In God and in you, my mother. I shall obey all the inspirations you send me, as I obey this, for, strange as it may appear, I cannot divest myself of the idea that this did come from you. At all events, it had its origin in a wise and noble sentiment,—a desire to know the truth, however disheartening it may be.

"So to-morrow, I am resolved to attend the reunion at Madame Herbaut's house."

So the next day, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, having feigned indisposition, and having escaped the assiduous attentions of the Rochaiguës by a firm refusal to admit them to her room, left the house soon after nightfall, accompanied by her governess, and, taking a cab some distance from the mansion, was driven to Madame Herbaut's house.

END OF VOLUME I.

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